

Socio-political site served lawyer's letter for defamation

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Socio-political site The Independent Singapore (TISG) has been served a lawyer's letter for alleged defamation in two articles about a foodcourt in Changi Airport.

The letter, served on Tuesday by David Lim & Partners on behalf of NTUC Foodfare, said the first article had alleged that an elderly hawker died after working 18-hour days to avoid getting fined by NTUC Foodfare.

The second article had alleged NTUC Foodfare had fined another elderly hawker for not working after he was injured.

NTUC Foodfare refuted the allegations on Tuesday.

The letter included demands that TISG take down the articles and post an apology to NTUC Foodfare by 3pm yesterday.

TISG publisher Kumaran Pillai posted the letter on its website yesterday and said it would not be removing the articles "until and unless our stories are proven to be utterly false, fabricated and baseless".

News of the action against TISG comes a day after the police seized electronic equipment from the home of The Online Citizen (TOC) editor Terry Xu as part of their investigations of TOC for criminal defamation.

The Infocomm Media Development Authority had made a police report against TOC and the author of the article "The take away from Seah Kian Ping's Facebook post".

Quoting parts of Mr Seah Kian Peng's Facebook post on Sept 1, the article had alleged corruption within the Government and tampering of the Constitution,

Mr Seah, an MP for Marine Parade GRC, is also chief executive officer of NTUC FairPrice.

The timing of the incidents have sparked online chatter whether the actions against the alternative news sites were a co-ordinated crackdown in view of the next election.

STRONG STAND

The New Paper spoke to two analysts who said the actions were in line with the Government's stand against online falsehoods.

Institute of Policy Studies deputy director Gillian Koh said the Government has made it clear that it wants to ensure the public is not misinformed by deliberate online falsehoods.

She said: "It's not a new message that online falsehoods are a problem, and the tolerance for such falsehoods is now waning.

"It's not an unusual move, with years of questionable material online.

"I'm sure there will be action to reinforce the point that it is a menace and requires an aggressive response."

Noting that the timing of the incidents was likely a coincidence, Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan said: "It shouldn't surprise us if some people take the view that these actions were coordinated or that this is an attempt to clamp down on free expression.

"But both the Government and NTUC Foodfare believe they have a strong basis for seeking legal recourse. There is no need for them to coordinate."

Rejecting the view of the incidents being a clampdown, he added: "Ultimately, these organisations have determined their reputations have been severely damaged by these remarks... They are entitled to protect their reputation since it impacts on their credibility and standing."

Asked if the incidents could be linked to the next election, both analysts said the Government's focus is on actively tackling deliberate online falsehoods to create awareness among Singaporeans and prevent them from being misinformed during the election.

CONCERNED

Dr Koh said: "We should be concerned about political stability, and the integrity of the Government is an important issue to think about, but not if the questions raised are based on what are later found to be falsehoods.

"These issues are relevant whether elections are now or two years away, and with proposals for new legislation (on online falsehoods) looming."