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strangers.**August 4, 2009**

Iraq Censorship Laws Move Ahead

By [TIMOTHY WILLIAMS](#)

BAGHDAD — The doors of the communications revolution were thrown open in [Iraq](#) after the American-led invasion in 2003: In rushed a wave of music videos featuring scantily clad Turkish singers, Web sites recruiting suicide bombers, racy Egyptian soap operas, pornography, romance novels, and American and Israeli news and entertainment sites that had long been blocked under [Saddam Hussein's](#) rule.

Now those doors may be shut again, at least partially, as the Iraqi government moves to ban sites deemed harmful to the public, to require Internet cafes to register with the authorities and to press publishers to censor books.

The government, which has been proceeding quietly on the new censorship laws, said prohibitions were necessary because material currently available in the country had had the effect of encouraging sectarian violence in the fragile democracy and of warping the minds of the young.

“Our Constitution respects freedom of thought and freedom of expression, but that should come with respect for society as a whole, and for moral behavior,” said Taher Naser al-Hmood, Iraq’s deputy cultural minister. “It is not easy to balance security and democracy. It is like being a tightrope walker.”

But opponents of the proposals question why Iraq would seek to impose the same sorts of censorship that had been among the most loathed aspects of daily life under Saddam Hussein and suggest that they are another example of [Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki's working to consolidate his power](#). The new policies will put Iraq more in line with neighboring Islamic states.

The new rules constitute a “return of dictatorship,” said Ziad al-Ajeeli, who directs the Society to Defend the Freedom of the Press, a nonprofit Iraqi group.

“Imposing censorship represents an end of the freedom of expression and thought that arrived in Iraq after [April 9, 2003](#),” he said, referring to the date a towering statue of Mr. Hussein was knocked down in Baghdad.

Iraq’s Constitution is not clear on the matter. It guarantees freedom of expression, but only if it “does not violate public order and morality.”

The Constitution specifically prohibits material that includes accusations of being an apostate, a justification used by Sunni extremists to kill Shiites — and a particular concern to Iraq’s Shiite-led government.

This month, the government has started to require dozens of Internet cafes to register with the government or be closed.

“We are living in such a dangerous time that we need to control things,” said Majeed H. Jasim, director of the State Company for Internet Services.

The attempt to limit access to information was prompted by a meeting in May in which Mr. Maliki asked his ministers to develop methods to halt material entering Iraq — whether via the Internet or over its borders — that advocated violence or included sexual content.

In July, a government committee recommended that the drafting of a law allowing for official Internet monitoring and the prosecution of violators be expedited.

Among the prohibited sites, according to the committee’s report, would be those with subject matter including “drugs, terrorism, gambling, negative remarks about Islam and pornography.”

This spring, the government contacted the handful of Iraqi book publishers still in business and asked them to compile lists of their books, along with a description of the subject matter.

The material is to be kept at the Ministry of Culture, which is also preparing a document to be signed by publishers in which they will pledge not to distribute books the government deems offensive.

“There are books that are very dangerous, that invite and encourage suicide bombers, that explain the joy and pleasure and immortality that will come to those who perform suicide bombings,” said Mr. Hmood, the deputy culture minister. “How do we deal with it? We will ask the publisher to sign a document promising not to bring such books into Iraq. We are not a security ministry, but we can help the security situation and make the publisher feel he has a commitment to follow the law and that he will be punished if he does not.”

Book publishers say the new policy could be the death knell for Iraq’s once vibrant industry.

“After the fall of the previous regime we were optimistic,” said Ghada al-Amily, manager of a Baghdad publishing firm, The House of Arts and Cultures. “But instead of activating and encouraging publishing houses, they are incapacitating them.”

Taha H. al-Shebeeb, an Iraqi writer of 10 novels whose politically tinged work often put him at odds with Mr. Hussein’s government, called the current plans “an awful retreat.”

“If this is true, I will hold a press conference where I will burn my novels and say that I had been mistaken when I objected to the policies of the previous regime,” he said.

Ahmed Mohammed Raouf, chief engineer for the State Company for Internet Services, said he had mixed feelings about censorship.

He held a similar position in Mr. Hussein’s government and remembers being ordered to filter any site that was even remotely “antiregime.”

“We are a technical ministry, not a political ministry,” he said. “Our job is to bring the systems, the tools, but not to decide what can be said. We are engineers and technicians.” He added, however, that “the situation had gotten out of control.”

“Democracy should also mean having a responsibility to society,” he said. “It doesn’t mean there should be no limitations or restrictions.

“I don’t want to stop a person from seeing a certain thing,” he said, “but I also want to protect society.”

Only a few hundred thousand people have Internet access in Iraq, according to estimates, but it is popular among the young.

Among the more popular uses are [Facebook](#), dating sites and pornography.

“I like to go to Internet cafes for two reasons — one is to have fun chatting with friends and the other is to find some privacy because I like to look at porn sites and I can’t do that at home,” Mohammed Saad, a 19-year-old student said while sitting in an Internet cafe in the Karada neighborhood of Baghdad.

But other young people say they are encouraged by the possibility of a ban on some sites and want to extend the prohibitions to other technology as well.

“We want to go back,” said Yosra Marwan, a 24-year-old student. “I do not like cellphones and the Internet and satellite television. Please tell people I am one of the Iraqis who dream of living in simplicity to avoid falling into sin.”

Reporting was contributed by Anwar J. Ali, Muhammed al-Obaidi, Abeer Mohammed and Riyadh Mohammed.

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