

GOVERNMENT CENSORSHIP IN SYRIA

Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.

When the New York based Committee to Protect Journalists listed the ten worst countries in which to be a blogger, Syria was near the top – number three behind Iran and Burma. The Middle East was well represented in the top online oppressors. Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Egypt are also on that list.

Arab governments have become more aggressive as the Arab world has become increasingly wired. In Syria, if you type in Facebook, YouTube or any variety of new sites, a blank page appears. In addition to selective filtering, there are selective arrests. A nineteen-year-old Syrian poet and blogger, Tal El-Melouhy, was detained without charge. Her computer was confiscated. She has been jailed for almost a year.

When a young blogger gets such harsh treatment it sends a message to others says Andrew Tabler who started an English language magazine in Syria and is now with Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

“It serves as an example and to strike fear in people’s minds many times when they serve up these examples. They don’t give a clear sentencing or a clear indictment concerning a crime. It’s that not knowing that drives up people’s anxiety and ultimately makes them self-centered.”

Autocratic governments can’t completely ignore the aspirations of the young. They are the largest segment of the population growing up in an information revolution that is televised, tweeted, and texted. They have tuned out serious stodgy old state broadcasting so the Syrian government is offering new media, private outlets, television, print and radio run by a new generation of Syrian journalists.

With a mix of Arabic and English, western rock and Arabic favorites, host Honey al-Sayed on Medina radio offers horoscopes and daily currency exchange rates. She banter with truck drivers who call in to pass on the latest jokes.

She says she is pushing the boundaries of free speech in Syria. “We were the first private radio to open in Syria and we are now allowed to do something different. So that’s Syria opening up.”

The opening began in 2001 with a new law that allowed private media after years of heavy state control. There are more than 100 private newspapers and magazines, and dozens of private commercial radio stations. Licenses have been awarded to business elites with close ties to the government, but still there is freedom to talk about topics that have long been tabooed.

A top radio station can raise controversial social issues but there are severe restrictions on political topics, the performance of the government and human rights. The biggest challenge to the government’s monopoly over the media is on the web. Dozens of news websites, political blogs and Facebook groups have emerged that aren’t so easily controlled says Tabler.

“There is a very vibrant blogging community in Syria mostly through a number of Internet cafes which are set up throughout the country and mostly in the Syrian capital and major cities. They have found very interesting ways to get around the state’s proxy server which allows the state to theoretically control what people read and what they communicate.”

Even so, the Syrian government has banned as many as 200 sites and is considering a licensing law to regulate domestic online sites. But there is a reason Tabler chose the words “theoretically controlled.”

Young Syrians know how to get around the government bans. Websites cross borders and all you need is a phone line to a country next door.

Khaled al-Ekhetyar, a blogger and a reporter for a banned online news site explains how it works when you believe someone is always watching you.

“Well you can read whatever you want or sometimes you can write whatever you want. They cannot control the Internet but they can control the people. With the iPhones or the cell phones, they can do what that want. They are doing that, but they don’t want you to feel comfortable. So it’s really a psychological issue.”

What they learn is that bloggers have been jailed for crimes as big as “undermining national sentiment”. Internet cafes are licensed and owners have to report the national ID of every user and the sites that are surfed. While the Internet has been a new challenge, governments have learned how to counter any threat says, Josh Landis, an American professor who studies Syria.

“It’s about establishing the limits. The government sits on top of these people. It says, ‘Okay you can read all this stuff. You can do it but if you think you are going to organize, if you think that you are going to make a campaign or you are going to try to bring down the government, then you are going to go to jail.’ That’s very clear in Syria, and most Syrians don’t do it. They are depoliticized. They are not involved in politics. There has not really been a politicized youth movement. It’s all about materialism these days.”

Rami Khouri at the American University of Beirut says it’s a pattern across the region.

“These are very security-minded states – all the Arab states. These guys know what they are doing. There hasn’t been a coup since 1970. So that’s why they feel they can blog. It’s not going to make any difference except for some people in Washington who are going to say, ‘Oh my gosh, look at this! There is going to be a revolution in the Arab world because these guys are blogging.’ The reality is that nobody has been able to use the media and the new media to bring about political change anywhere – not an opening, not a change in leadership, not a serious change in policy, nothing. So the new media is mostly an entertainment media, it is not a significant empowerment or a political change tool yet.”

– *Reported by Deborah Amos for America Abroad*