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Middle East/North Africa - Saudi Arabia - Internet Enemies

Saudi Arabia
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Unrelenting censorship still plagues the Net – the only space in the country where some form of freedom of expression has managed to thrive in the last few years. Some still-mobilised cyberdissidents, who were caught by the authorities exercising their right to voice critical opinions, paid a stiff price.

Strict filtering and denunciations

An strictly enforced filtering system targets any content which authorities deem to be pornographic or "morally reprehensible". Websites which discuss religious or human rights issues or the opposition viewpoints are also blocked. Far from concealing their actions, the authorities openly attest to their censorship practices and claim to have blocked some 400,000 sites.

Prohibited websites now include the Arab Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), and the sites gulfissues.net, saudiinstitute.org, arabianews.org, Al Jazeera.org and saudiaffairs.net.

The latest censorship targets are the pages about Saudi Arabia on the Arabic-language version of Wikileaks and the Elaph website, an online political news magazine. The latter had recently published an article entitled "Gulf after WikiLeaks storm: Riyadh speaks while all are silent." The article discussed the turmoil in political circles after WikiLeaks published cables revealing that Saudi diplomats had urged the United States to attack Iranian nuclear reactors.

Two websites were blocked in early 2011 in reaction to the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. Both sites, dawlaty.info and saudireform.com, were calling for political change in the country.

Participating websites are subject to particularly harsh censorship. The site newarabia.org, a political discussion forum, is blocked in Saudi Arabia. The blogger.com platform, totally blocked at first, is now the subject of a targeted censorship of its content – proof that authorities are no longer able to prevent blogger input. Censors took aim at the micro-blogging website Twitter for the first time in August 2009, blocking the pages of two human rights activists, Khaled al-Nasser and Walid Abdelkhair. Facebook pages on human rights were also rendered inaccessible.

The government-controlled Internet Services Unit has even ventured to explain the principles behind its filtering policy on its website. It provides a form which citizens can use to request that a website be blocked or unblocked. According to Saudi authorities, this procedure has been rather successful. The Telecommunications and Information Technologies Agency claims that the blocking requests target from 700 to 1,000 sites daily, averaging some 300,000 "citizen-denounced" sites per year. A representative of that same agency estimates that 93% of the filtered sites are pornographic in nature. The rest: websites which disseminate information "contrary to kingdom values." One of the agency's officials acknowledges, however, that 55% of users are concerned about the blockings and that three-quarters of them feel that the current filtering policy is too harsh.

"BlackBerrys" under pressure

BlackBerry phones are popular in the Persian Gulf and in Saudi Arabia, where they enable users to circumvent censorship. However, as a result of pressures from authorities threatening to block the BlackBerrys' instant messaging service, RIM, the BlackBerry manufacturing company, allegedly agreed, in August 2010, to install a server in Saudi Arabia. Supposedly, the aim was not to share the keys to its encryption with Saudi authorities, which would enable them to set up real-time surveillance, but to give them the opportunity of having court-ordered access to certain messages after the fact. In view of the Saudi court system's independent

status, the country's smartphone users have reasons to be worried.

Cybercafés under surveillance

Draconian restrictions were imposed on cybercafés as of April 2009. They are now required to install hidden cameras, provide a list of customers and websites consulted, prohibit the use of prepaid cards or non-authorised Internet satellite links, to close at midnight and to refuse to admit minors.

Their owners risk prison terms if their premises are used to disseminate information contrary to "kingdom values" as set out in the 2008 law on the use of technology. This law also provides ten-year prison sentences for Internet website managers who promote terrorism, and five years for those who disseminate pornographic information or violate the country's religious and social values.

Anti-freedom legislation intensifies

New regulations on Internet publications aimed at strengthening Net censorship and discouraging Internet users from creating a website or blog were announced on 1 January 2011 by the Minister of Culture and Information, Abdul Aziz Khoja.

According to Article 7 of this text, online media, the Internet websites of the so-called "traditional" media, and platforms circulating audio or video material and offering online ads must, in order to operate, obtain an Internet licence, valid for three years, from the Ministry of Culture and Information. In order to get it, the applicant must be at least 20 years of age, be a Saudi national and hold a diploma equivalent to the baccalaureate. He or she also must produce "certificates of good conduct."

The media must also indicate the name of their hosting service, which gives the government the option of forcing the service to eliminate the site or its content. All forms, blogs or personal Internet sites, distribution lists, electronic archives or "chat rooms" will henceforth have to be registered. Bloggers may identify themselves "if they wish to." The obvious intent is to chip away at their anonymity.

The Ministry was supposed to first approve the editor appointed for all electronic newspapers. However, in view of the wave of protests triggered by this provision, the Minister of Information promised, on 6 January, to drop it. All that is required now is for a "simple declaration" of the editor's identity to be filed with the Ministry.

Under Article 17, any violation of these provisions is punishable by fines and a partial or total, temporary or permanent, blocking of the website. Fines may be as high as 100,000 Saudi riyals (20,000 euros), which constitutes an indirect form of economic censorship, given that many sites cannot afford to pay such a sum. The Ministry reserves the right to expand the scope of these measures.

Incarcerated cyberdissidents

Any bloggers who dare to discuss sensitive subjects are subject to censor reprisals. Two of them were arrested in 2010.

Sheikh Mekhlef bin Dahham al-Shammari, a writer, social reformer and human rights activist known for his outspoken defence of women's rights and his efforts to reconcile Shiites and Sunnis, has been behind bars since 15 June 2010 and is said to be in poor health. He stands accused, quite fancifully, of "annoying others." His arrest was linked to his criticisms of political and religious leaders, posted primarily on the new sites saudiyoon.com and rasid.com.

Mohammed Abdallah Al-Abdulkarim, a law professor and activist known for his efforts to defend political and civic rights, was arrested on 5 December 2010 in Riyadh. Following King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud's medically motivated trip to the United States, Mohammed Al-Abdulkarim posted, on 23 November 2010, on the website royaah.net, an article mentioning differences within the royal family – specifically disputes over King Abdullah's succession and their consequences for Saudi Arabia's political future. In this post, he mentioned not only the King's state of health, but also the power struggle between the 86-year-old sovereign's potential successors.

There is still no news of Syrian blogger **Raafat Al-Ghanim**, a resident of Saudi Arabia who was arrested in July 2009. He openly criticised the Syrian and Saudi social and political situations on both countries' online forums.

Facebook: A tool for mobilisation or socialisation?

In November 2010, Facebook was blocked for several hours for having violated Saudi Arabia's

moral values, which raised caused a stir on the Web. Was this an isolated incident or a test paving the way for even harsher censorship? The authorities have little tolerance for online mobilisations, especially since the Tunisian revolution.

Not only are Saudi netizens resisting censorship by learning how to circumvent it, but they are also capable of conducting online mobilisation campaigns, notably on Facebook.

In 2010, a woman launched a Facebook group to protest against the ban prohibiting women from working in lingerie shops. She succeeded in winning 10,000 supporters.

The Net has been providing Saudi women – who now represent more than half of the country's bloggers and internet users – with an unprecedented space in which to express themselves. There, they can discuss topics which they are forbidden to mention in public, such as health. Saudi Arabia's tight control over these new technologies also indicates the depth of their resolve to maintain the social order.

Online mobilisations are also being launched in support of human rights activists. News about Mohammed Abdallah Al-Abdulkarim's arrest was initially circulated on his Facebook page before being reposted on a large number of Internet websites. Numerous Saudi human rights organisations publicly denounced it. Several Facebook pages, including "We are all Mohammed Abdulkarim" and "Free Dr. Abdulkarim", as well as a hashtag (#FreeDrAbdulkarim) on Twitter, were created to demand his immediate release. His case aroused heated discussions between netizens siding with him and those who sided with the regime. A memorable debate broke out on Twitter between Abdulrahman Alenad, a member of the Consultative Assembly of Saudi Arabia (Shura) and Dr. Abdulkarim's lawyer, Waleed Abulkhair, when the former ordered the latter to keep quiet.

Domain name : .sa
Population : more than 25 millions
Internet users : 11.2 million
Average monthly salary : 1,233 U.S. dollars
Number of imprisoned netizens : 2