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Rating the X-rated The cost of Egypts ethical porn ban



Keep your head down, lower your gaze. Squint, dare not stare. And muse over whether the best interests of your nation are being served. A new moral code has been sculpted for Egyptians, one which has jostled them into a freeze frame “based on ethics.” The limits have well and truly been set, much to the mass grumble of Egyptians from liberal circles.

To quote Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood spokesman, the decision to ban all pornographic online content in Egypt on Wednesday by the state prosecutor was “a first step towards establishing a society based on ethics.” And the reaction has showcased the usual split in Egyptian society, one which has made a cyclical appearance since the Islamist powers garnered control of the country’s presidential and parliamentary scenes: The societal yearning for freedom of expression vs. state control. Now in Egypt, the ban has raised questions over the futility of online censorship – whether blocking porn can be easily dodged with a bit of proxy fine-tuning – and whether authorities are stifling democratic freedoms by crouching behind “ethical boundaries.” The argument being, attributing the porn ban to “ethics” and the “national interest” is an open-ended declaration.

Western culture ‘promotes porn’

“These pornographic websites stem from a Western culture, they deteriorate our moral family values and youth. They promote a criminal culture, one which leads to unproductivity, drugs and theft,” says Mamdouh Ismail, a Salafi member of the Egyptian parliament who rose to prominence after he stood up during a parliament session in February to loudly recite the Azaan, or call to prayer, in protest of session timings. “It corrupts the promotion of Muslim values and the ban should have been implemented much earlier,” he added. Ultraconservative Salafi Muslims had launched a campaign called "Pure Net" to prohibit pornography online in Egypt. Pornography is not permitted throughout the Arab Muslim world, though previously in Egypt, and some other nations, the state has not actively tried to prevent access to online sites. But Pakistani writer Jahanzaib Haque asks: “Who gets to define what is obscene and what is pornography?”, referring to online porn restrictions in Pakistan. “What is obscene? Is Sex and the City obscene? It may be to our rabid mullah folk, and since they have the upper hand in this country devastated by politicized religion, can we expect a ban on YouTube in any number of very real dystopian future scenarios? Most certainly, such oppression is just a step away from banning porn,” he adds. But to tackle Egypt’s porn quagmire, let’s start at the beginning. In 2009, an Egyptian court issued a ruling that internet pornography should be banned, but the state did not act on it. The government, then headed by former president Hosni Mubarak, was all ears to the ruling, reporting the court decision through state media and propagating the news. But then, silence. While the court had dubbed online porn content as “venomous and vile,” the Ministry of Communications, which regulates internet providers in Egypt, immediately said it had “not heard” of the decision. This silence effectively detached the state from the awkward position of being seen to defend pornography. But a reason for flouting the ruling may have tied in with a stark calculation, although unannounced at the time. Technology experts estimated the costs of such a ban would weigh in at around \$16.5 million, according to Egyptian media reports. Perhaps Mubarak’s government, now exposed with ties to a flurry of corruption sagas, opted to swerve away from the hefty price tag the poverty-stricken country would have had to pay up. “It’s worth the price. No matter how much it costs, the moral value of this will be much more significant,” says Ismail. The million-dollar estimate was racked up back in April this year, after Islamist members of Egypt’s then newly-elected (now dissolved) parliament hauled the topic into the limelight once again. They called for measures to block all pornographic websites, citing their allegedly corrosive effect on society and moral values, but prompted a backlash from liberals, similar to the reactions vented on microblogging site Twitter in the past 24 hours. “In a country that faces a horrible percentage of harassment events, they ban porn sites! What do you expect to happen now?! Rape?” posted Twitter user Ahmed Nasri as @Warchadi. In a similar vein, other Twitter users based in Egypt warned of sexual frustration, and therefore harassment “going up a notch,” owing to restricted pornographic content.

‘Dumb’ citizens

But a main concern for Egyptians, overshadowing the debate, has been the prospect of a porn ban leading to increased online censorship in other areas; the ultimate risk to Egypt's civil liberties. Mona Eltahawy, an Egyptian-American activist, posted a tweet saying "I'm not arguing w anyone about porn but know this: "ban" porn sites today, ban your sites tomorrow. #Egypt." Countries such as Iran and China, which have near-complete blocks on pornography, have also effectively banned political websites, claims communications expert Nagi Anis. Restricting access to pornographic sites could be only the first step in blocking all internet content that certain quarters deem objectionable, Anis told Egypt's Ahrām Online in April. While political activist and treasurer of the Egyptian Internet Association, Shaarawi Shaarawi, told the newspaper blocking adults sites could be a prelude to a crackdown on online political voices and lead to the type of repression witnessed under the Mubarak regime. "Activists see it as infringement on their rights, a as step to curb freedom, cracking down on internet freedoms," says Dr. Omar Ashour, Director of Middle East Studies at the University of Exeter. Ramy Raouf, an online activist told the British press earlier this year that such a ban patronized Egyptian society. "Censorship presumes that citizens are dumb and lack knowledge, and that the state must carry out that role for them because it knows better," he said. "If you want to protect people from trouble, it is never through withholding information." And indeed, the internet has been hailed by social media analysts for instigating a Twitter and Facebook "buzz" during 2011's revolutionary action, "Anything that threatens internet freedoms after the revolution will be challenged," Ashour adds. But for those, like Raouf, who have dubbed the ban as naïve and an example of the North African country taking a leap backwards in terms of freedoms of expression, Ashour sees a differing slant. "This is not naïve in terms of political thinking; the ban is a way for them to capitalize politically, to tell their supporters they are keeping their promise of a conservative social agenda. It's an easy battle to fight to appease their supporters." But despite the wave of online criticism of the prohibition, "it is very hard for politicians and activists oppose a ban on pornography, because Islamists are able to then frame them as pro porn and decadent," says Ashour. Whether or not the ban will enforce a more bashful ethical code onto Egyptian society, it fails to stem any existing demand for the barred online content – even it limits its supply. And while authorities have not publicly detailed how they will implement the ban, which sites will be deemed offensive and how the ban will be monitored, it appears the activists who have spoken out don't care much about the porn, it's the fear of what will be censored next.