
IRAQ TAKES AIM AT MEDIA AS SECURITY FORCES STRUGGLE TO CONTAIN STRIFE

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Iraq's Shi'ite-led authorities have shut the offices of two television channels popular with Sunni Iraqis and ordered a satirical show off air, tightening control over the media as political tensions rise in Baghdad.

The crackdown, which began in March, appears to be prompted by concerns that the channels could enflame sectarian rivalries which over-stretched security forces would struggle to contain.

But it also raises fears over freedom of expression. The Communication and Media Commission (CMC), has shut down the Baghdad office of the pan-Arab broadcaster Al Jazeera, closed the local TV channel Al-Baghdadia, and ordered a halt to broadcasts of the satirical Albasheer Show.

It said Al Jazeera and the Albasheer Show, which mocks powerful Iraqi figures in the spirit of The Daily Show in the United States or France's Le Petit Journal, have violated a code of professional conduct. The CMC is a state authority tasked with implementing government policy. It gave few details and declined requests for comment.

"They had some reservations about [us] using the term 'militias' when referring to the Hashid Shaabi," said Waleed Ibrahim, Al Jazeera's Iraq bureau chief, referring to a coalition of mostly Shi'ite Muslim paramilitary groups formed to fight Islamic State.

He said the CMC also objected to opinions expressed on the Qatar-based channel by guests in talk-shows broadcast from Doha.

"We tried to explain that these are the guests' points of view and not necessarily ours," he said. Al-Baghdadia, a television channel owned by Iraqi entrepreneur Awn al-Khashlok and featuring programming popular with the Sunni minority, was shut down in March. A CMC statement said the

channel lacked proper authorization.

These are some of the strongest restrictions on media in the nearly two-year tenure of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, a moderate Shi'ite Islamist who came to office promising to mend the rift between Sunnis and the Shi'ite majority. His office did not respond to requests for comment.

Abadi's predecessor, Nuri al-Maliki, decreed a state of emergency restricting media coverage in 2014 after Islamic State seized a third of the country's territory. Those restrictions were eased when Abadi succeeded him.

Maliki, a close ally of Iran, had revoked Al Jazeera's license a year earlier, accusing the Doha-based network of adopting a sectarian tone after it covered Sunni demonstrations against him. The license was restored last year.

Iraq's Shi'ite-led governments have had volatile relations with nearby Qatar and other Gulf Arab countries since Sunni autocrat Saddam Hussein was toppled in 2003.

The country's Iranian-backed leaders have accused their Sunni neighbors of employing well-funded media outlets to undermine Iraq's political process by highlighting the suffering of Sunnis and covering anti-Maliki protests in 2013.

Shi'ite-backed media, in turn, face criticism of coverage accusing Gulf countries of supporting Sunni militancy in Iraq.

Political crisis

The United Nations and the United States have expressed concern about Al Jazeera's closure.

"These kinds of actions will not serve the fight against Daesh (Islamic State) as Iraq moves forward and begins to attempt to reconcile its diverse communities," a State Department spokesman in Washington said this month.

Iraq's security forces, while battling Islamic State in the north and west with the help of air strikes from a U.S.-led coalition, are on high alert in Baghdad. Bombings are still common in the capital --

including three on Wednesday that killed at least 80 people -- and a political crisis risks sinking into clashes between supporters of rival politicians.

The government has been crippled for weeks by disputes over Abadi's proposal to replace party-affiliated ministers with independent technocrats following popular demands to dismantle political patronage networks.

Powerful Shi'ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr has ordered his followers to protest in order to pressure Abadi to follow through on reform pledges. Abadi has proposed a new cabinet lineup, but parliament has failed to approve it. Lawmakers scuffled inside the chamber a month ago and have not convened a session since demonstrators stormed the assembly complex two weeks later.

"With each political crisis, they look for areas that attract the public's attention. Whenever a media outlet focuses on a problem, they order it to be shut down," said Ziyad al-Ajili, head of the watchdog Iraqi Journalistic Freedoms Observatory.

"They are currently implementing the same decisions taken in the past, when freedom of press was truly nonexistent," he said, referring to Maliki's eight-year rule.

The CMC issued a warning over a program aired on Al Ahad, a channel run by the Iranian-backed Asaib Ahl al-Haq militia.

The show's host, Wajih Abbas, compared 7th century Muslim caliph Othman to Saddam Hussein, offending Sunni sentiments.

No laughing matter

Another target of the CMC was a group of young irreverent Iraqis who produce the satirical Albasheer Show from neighboring Jordan.

Sumaria, an independent channel, was forced to take the program off the air last month even though its sketches often satirize Islamic State, mocking the militants' cruelty and violence.

The CMC ban was prompted by an episode that ridiculed a Shi'ite cleric for discussing whether

drinking milk from a dead cow was religiously sanctioned. The show continues on YouTube and Deutsche Welle's Arabic channel.

Its host, Ahmed al-Basheer, said he refused the government's demand to alter the program's content.

"This is the formula of the show. This is how it is written and the level of freedom that it enjoys," he said. "We will continue to criticize and ridicule those who are corrupt."

Journalists face more than government censorship in Iraq.

The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists said at least six journalists were killed in Islamic State-held Mosul last year, and in January two were gunned down in Diyala, an eastern area under government control.

Reporters Without Borders ranked Iraq 153 out of 180 in its 2016 World Press Freedom Index.

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