

'Government censorship remains necessary today.' To what extent do you agree?

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The watershed passage of the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act in Singapore's legislature that stipulated all forms of national print media were to obtain permits and were under the jurisdiction of government surveillance foreshadowed a shift towards compromise of civil liberties, such as through censorship, to achieve national interests. While the Singapore government maintains that the enforcement of censorship enables maintenance of social cohesion, liberals around the world disparage it as an unjustified curtailment of free speech that all individuals should otherwise be entitled to. While I agree to a large extent that government censorship remains necessary today, as censorship provides a medium for the government to depoliticise the public and curb extremism, and that censorship protects social cohesion, its necessity is undermined by governments abusing it as a blank cheque to unjustifiably enforce political and religious orthodoxy. Thus, I agree censorship is necessary to a large extent only to secure political and social stability, and not to maintain political orthodoxy.

The necessity of government censorship lies in its ability to depoliticise the public and curb the inexorable proliferation of extremism. With the increasing fragility of political conflicts internationally, political and sectarian cults have taken to the ever-growing interest, on top of other forms of media to radicalise and recruit people as pawns of their causes. The need to protect the public from such corrupting political influence has amplified the imperative to censor to stem the reach of these influences. This was highlighted in a recent case in Singapore when a female infant-care teacher was radicalised by the militant ISIS cause, on top of others who were galvanised by the extremist group in Malaysia through their websites. The pervasive proliferation of demagoguery and populism through the Internet could also be seen in Germany where the anti-Islam Pegida movement called on its supporters to stage chaotic demonstrations in protest of the Chancellor's pro-refugee policies. Thus, to protect the political landscape of the country, it is necessary to enforce government censorship to prevent the propagation of fervent reactionary politics.

Censorship also remains necessary to protect the social cohesion of a country. The prospect of legal chastisement through censorship policies has often been a deterrent for proliferation of hate speech, such as xenophobia and racism. The prevention of hate speech represents a systemic imposition of a greater degree of tolerance that is perpetuated in the long-term, creating a lasting legacy of social stability. For example, in Singapore the implementation of the Sedition Act that implicates anyone engaging in hate speech has created a long-term culture of tolerance and self-control among Singaporeans. This was seen in the wake of the Little India Riot in 2013 and the celebration of Filipino Independence Day in 2014, where xenophobic furore from a vocal minority was met with a backlash from voices of moderation and those involved in inciting the hostilities were charged. Thus, it is evident that Singapore's long history of censorship policies has created a more tolerant society and prevented a crystallisation of a 'them-against-us' mentality. The necessity of censorship therefore lies in creating a legacy of social cohesion.

However, I concede that the ability of governments to censor has been abused by governments as blank cheques to interpret censorship policies and apply it where they see fit to perpetuate political or religious orthodoxy, and for ruling governments to legitimise their own political parties. The abuse of censorship to block out valid criticism or stem transmission of ideas to maintain national status quo is bound to create a close-minded, politically inactive society that enables the government to act

with little opposition. This is seen in Turkey, where Prime Minister Erdogan made use of censorship powers to block Wikipedia on the pretext of blocking criticism towards his government. North Korea's incessant and stringent policies on censoring all forms of Western media, even going so far as to sentence those prosecuted of possessing such forms of media to death, has manifested itself in the form of generations of politically uneducated masses that has created a cult of personality obsequious and loyal to the Kim regime. Thus, censorship presents an opportunity for abuse to block the truth incessantly and risk creating a closed society.

On the other hand, countries that have been known to abuse censorship see it in their own right as it is necessary to secure a loyal and unopposed regime to maintain national unity. For example, censorship of pornographic material in Islamic countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, while seemingly would create a closed society, such censorship is necessary to perpetuate the rule of Sharia law which characterises their national identity. Thus, the strict implementation of censorship is not always a manifestation of corrupt governance.

In conclusion, I agree to a large extent that it is necessary to have government censorship as it creates a legacy of social cohesion and depoliticises public life away from radical influences that would otherwise cause political turmoil. However, governments must be careful to maintain a commitment to practising restraint and not abuse censorship to meet narrow self-interests; instead, it should use it purely as a means of policing the social and political landscape of the state. The issue of censorship presents a double-edged conundrum for governments that is characterized by a delicate balance between protection and control, and so long as governments refrain from the egregious abuse of censorship, then it would certainly put governments in a better position to maintain national cohesion. Thus, government censorship is only necessary to protect national integrity, and is justified so long as governments do not try to protect their own orthodoxy and narrow self-interests.

Comments:

Nicholas, a well-argued response to the issue of the need for state censorship with a clear thesis statement, and a good range of examples from different parts of the globe. Is there only that one counterargument – abuse by the government? Must censorship always be by the State? What about netizens and vigilante movements, especially in today's context? These could have been explored and explained more thoroughly. Excellent vocabulary and felicitous expressions abound, making this a pleasurable read.