

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

By Nicholas Giancarlo Canete (17S42)

The watershed passage of the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act in Singapore's legislature, stipulating that all forms of national print media were to obtain permits and were under the jurisdiction of government surveillance, foreshadowed a shift towards a compromise of civil liberties, such as through censorship, to achieve national interests. While the Singapore government maintains that the enforcement of censorship is necessary to ensure 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, curb extremism and 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 various forms of the 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 and stem the reach of these influences. This was highlighted in a recent case in Singapore, when a female infant-care teacher was radicalised by ISIS militants to support their cause, amongst others who were galvanised by the extremist group through their websites. The pervasive proliferation of demagoguery and populism through the Internet is also 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 a country and ensure stability, 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 to the proliferation of hate speech, such as xenophobia and racism. The prevention of hate speech represents a systematic 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 Sedition Act was implemented to implicate anyone engaging in hate speech, ensuring that a culture of tolerance and self-control among Singaporeans prevails. This was seen in the arrest of a couple behind a socio-political website 'The Real Singapore', which allegedly published remarks online that could promote ill-will and hostility among the different races in Singapore. There are other incidents of the use of hate speech by citizens, for example in the wake of the Little India Riot in 2013, and in response to a proposal to celebrate Filipino Independence Day in 2014 at a shopping centre in the heart of the city. Xenophobic furore from a vocal minority was met with a backlash from voices of moderation, evidence that Singapore's censorship policies are needed to help create a more tolerant society, and prevent a crystallisation of a 'them-against-us' mentality which will undermine social cohesion.

However, I concede that the ability of governments to censor has been abused by some governments to perpetuate political or religious orthodoxy, and to legitimise their own political parties. The abuse of censorship to censor valid criticism or stem transmission of ideas to maintain national status quo is bound to create a closed-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, creating a cult of personality obsequious and loyal to the Kim regime. Thus, censorship risks creating a closed society.

On the other hand, countries that have been known to abuse censorship see it in their own right to secure a loyal and unopposed regime to maintain national unity. Take for example the censorship of pornographic material in Islamic countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. While this would seemingly create a closed society, such censorship is necessary to perpetuate the rule of Sharia law, which characterises their national and cultural identity. Thus, 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 from radical influences that would otherwise cause political turmoil. However, governments must be careful to practise restraint and keep themselves away from abusing censorship to meet narrow self-interests; they should use censorship purely as a means to police the social and political landscape of the state and maintain stability. The issue of censorship presents a double-edged conundrum for governments characterized by a delicate balance between protection and control, and so long as governments stay away from an egregious abuse of censorship, they would be in a better position to maintain national cohesion. Thus, government censorship is only necessary to protect national integrity, 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 good range of examples from different parts of the globe. Do ensure factual accuracy though. Is there only that one counterargument – abuse by the government - especially since this question is about 'today'? Must censorship be by the State? What about netizens and vigilante movements? Excellent vocabulary and felicitous expressions abound.