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Egypt - Blocking internet websites a new step towards suppression of freedom of expression

Virtual Activism has learnt with great concern of the Egyptian public prosecutor's decision on November 7th 2012, to "block internet porn sites" and any images or visuals that "threaten the values and morals of the Egyptian family and national security".

Several issues need to be taken into consideration:

1- From previous international experiences content control has never been successful and in fact has had a reverse effect.

2- Allowing internet censorship because of 'pornography' opens the door for further censorship of the web.

3- Defining what is or is not pornographic or a 'threat to the morality of the family' is a relative matter. If left undefined it will lead to censoring any form of free speech and expression depending on the censor's whims or set of beliefs.

4- The loose wording of 'threat to national security' has always been used as an excuse to

further curb free expression.

Virtual Activism would like to draw the Egyptian government's attention to the fact that it is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which states in article 19/par2 that

Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.

We would also like to draw the Egyptian government's attention to the fact that access to information has been declared a 'fundamental right' by the UN.

Virtual Activism would like to reiterate what the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression noted that the internet is one of the most powerful instruments of the 21st century for "increasing transparency in the conduct of the powerful, access to information, and for facilitating
active citizen participation in building democratic societies." The Internet also can play an important role in "mobilizing the population to call for justice, equality,
accountability and better respect for human rights." Facilitating access to the
Internet for all individuals, with as little restriction to online content as possible, should be a priority for all States.

Virtual Activism recognizes that some internet content might be harmful and may be abused. However we believe that any form of censorship or blocking of the internet constitutes a suppression of the freedom of speech and freedom of access to information both of which are guaranteed by UN declarations and resolutions to which Egypt is a signatory.

Should such a decision be made, therefore, it needs to be preceded by an extensive legal discussion that is inclusive of all sectors of civil society. There should be adequate guarantees

that such a law will not be abused against political activists and other forms of free expression.

Should the decision be enforced as it currently stands, it threatens to be a step closer to blocking the internet completely.

Virtual Activism would like to reiterate that blocking and censoring is not a solution. Raising awareness and education are the only solution.