King of Jordan approves a bill to criminalize online speech harmful to national unity

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The King of Jordan approved a bill Saturday to punish online speech deemed harmful to national unity, according to the Jordanian state news agency, legislation that has drawn accusations from human rights groups of a crackdown on free expression in a country where censorship is on the rise.

The measure makes certain online posts punishable with months of prison time and fines. These include comments “promoting, instigating, aiding, or inciting immorality,” demonstrating ”contempt for religion” or “undermining national unity.”

It also punishes those who publish names or pictures of police officers online and outlaws certain methods of maintaining online anonymity.

With the approval of King Abdullah II, the bill now becomes law — set to take effect one month after it is published in the state newspaper, Al-Rai. The newspaper is expected to publish the law tomorrow.

After amending the bill to allow judges to choose between imposing prison time and fines, rather than ordering combined penalties, the Senate passed the bill Tuesday, Jordan's state-run news agency reported. The measure was passed by Jordan’s lower house of parliament in July.

Lawmakers have argued that the measure, which amends a 2015 cybercrime law, is necessary to punish blackmailers and online attackers.

But opposition lawmakers and human rights groups caution that the new law will expand state control over social media, hamper free access to information and penalize anti-government speech.

A coalition of 14 human rights groups, including Human Rights Watch, has called the law “draconian.” The groups say “vague provisions open the door for Jordan’s executive branch to punish individuals for exercising their right to freedom of expression, forcing the judges to convict citizens in most cases.”

The president of Jordan’s press association also warned the language could infringe upon press freedom and freedom of speech.

The measure is the latest in a series of crackdowns on freedom of expression in Jordan, a key U.S. ally seen as an important source of stability in the volatile Middle East. A report by Human Rights Watch in 2022 found that authorities increasingly target protesters and journalists in a “systematic campaign to quell peaceful opposition and silence critical voices.”

All power in Jordan rests with Abdullah II, who appoints and dismisses governments. Parliament is compliant because of a single-vote electoral system that discourages the formation of strong political parties. Abdullah has repeatedly promised to open the political system, but then pulled back due to concerns of losing control to an Islamist surge.