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Unholy row as Saudi clerics slam Ramadan TV

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By Andrew Hammond

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RIYADH (Reuters) - The sanctity of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan has been spoiled for some in the Arab world by an unholy row over "depraved" TV comedies and serials that have led Saudi clerics to demand the death penalty.

Saudi Arabia's powerful religious establishment has complained for years about what they see as brazen attacks on them and Islam by liberals who dominate Arab media.

Saudi royals and business allies have set up pan-Arab news and entertainment channels outside Saudi Arabia that aim partly at influencing Saudi Arabia's domestic politics. Liberals and conservatives are engaged in a low-level war over the future of the key U.S. ally and world's biggest oil exporter.

But television this year has seemingly pushed some clerics to apoplexy with romantic soaps showcasing liberal lifestyles, dramas that fan the flames of ancient tribal hatreds and slapstick comedies that have captured the public's heart.

Ramadan, which ends around September 30, is a month of fasting when Muslims are supposed to focus on God. But across the Arab world it has become an orgy of food and TV consumption once the fast ends at sunset and advertisers have a captive audience.

"If they continue airing depravity and shamelessness they should be banished from this place and others brought in their place," senior Saudi cleric Sheikh Saleh al-Fozan said in comments published on Sunday, referring to TV executives.

He suggested purveyors of horoscopes and "sorcery" should face the death penalty, and head of the Islamic sharia courts Sheikh Saleh al-Lohaidan said last week channel owners should be tried and face possible death for "indecent and vulgarity."

Arab TV producers aren't laughing.

"I haven't seen anything that approaches depravity," said Abdelkhalek al-Ghanem, a producer of a comedy show on Saudi Arabia's more staid state-run

Channel One. "There's dancing and things but that's been there for a long time, it's not new. Some dramas have discussed tribal extremism, but depravity, no."

The United Arab Emirates last week pulled a Syrian serial, "Saadoun al-Awajy," after Saudi tribal leaders complained that it was stoking ancient rivalries.

Saudi Arabia has had difficulty carving out a national identity since it was formed in 1932 as an alliance between the Saudi family and puritan clerics who administer sharia law.

Saudi television critics have attacked what they called "foul language" in two Saudi comedies on pan-Arab entertainment channel MBC1 that air in early evening after the sunset prayer.

Arab comedy and drama is generally more tame than its Western counterpart, avoiding everyday street language, and this conservatism is even more pronounced in Saudi Arabia.

In one much-criticized scene on "Bayni wa Baynak" (Between Us), for example, one character insulted another by telling him he could stick his mobile phone chip "in your you-know-where."

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Odwan al-Ahmari, who writes in the daily al-Watan, said it was the religious media that was provoking clerics to attack the entertainment channels, which have bigger audiences.

"It's the fatwa programs that are trying to stir trouble with the entertainment channels by asking these questions. The sheikh is bound to say these programs are sinful," he said.

Popular Turkish soap operas dubbed into Arabic have provoked a storm of anger among Saudi conservatives who fear the spread of secular culture. They see Turkey as the West's fifth column into the Islamic world.

The attacks have raised eyebrows because the owners of Arab entertainment channels, including MBC, ART, Orbit, Rotana and LBC, are members of the Saudi royal family or businessmen allies. A spokesman for MBC declined to comment.

One TV official who did not want to be named said religious conservatives could not push back the tide in Arab entertainment television, which already pays attention to social and religious mores. "You can't put the consumer back in the box," he said.

Statistics compiled for MBC indicate that one episode of Turkish soap "Noor" reached an audience of 85 million, half of whom were women, in early August.

There are around 300 million Arabic-speakers throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

(Editing by Ralph Boulton)

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