

Praise for Tougher Consumer Protection

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A new consumer law in Syria is being seen as a welcome step to protect people from overpriced or harmful goods and fraudulent trading practices. The only major concern is that people will be able to break the rules by paying bribes.

The law, which went into effect on June 11, sets out stiff penalties for a wide range of offences such as selling fake merchandise and products that do not meet government standards, as well as for inaccurate advertising. The import of items deemed dangerous or unsafe will be banned.

By law, shops, traders and other sales outlets like hotels will have to mark their prices clearly, which is not always the case at the moment.

After working on the legislation for three years, parliament has passed it at a time when Syrians are increasingly preoccupied with economic concerns. As the inflation rate climbs and fuel subsidy cuts take effect, there is growing concern that shops are hoarding products and bumping up their prices.

Mahmoud al-Mubayidh, trade director for Damascus city and an expert on consumer matters, says the law will “fix prices and limit the exploitation [of consumers] by increasing penalties.”

Anyone who produces, imports, sells or markets products in violation of the law could face a jail term of between ten days and a year, and fines of 10,000 to 200,000 lira – between 200 and 4,000 US dollars.

While many people are most worried about overpriced goods, one of the first publicised crackdowns under the new law – reported in the state-run newspaper *Tishreen* – concerned misleading advertisements promoting, for example, fictitious universities, fraudulent property traders, fake cancer treatments, and a prostitution ring under the guise of a youth hotline.

Some argue that while the hefty fines might act as a deterrent to consumer fraud, general levels of corruption are so high that imposing the rules may be problematic.

“It has to do with a citizen’s personality,” said Suleiman Bubis, scientific director at the Zar Zur Sanitation Company, and an expert on quality control. “If it’s someone without a conscience... then the consumer protection law certainly isn’t going to stop them, and it will be ineffective.”

But Bubis predicted the law would help keep prices stable and curb cheating.

SANA, the state news agency, reported that in addition to an office tasked with enforcing consumer protection regulations in Damascus, the trade and economy ministry would open branches in Aleppo and Hasaka, and later on in other parts of the country.

Many Syrians are still unaware of the new law and of their right to report violations to the ministry offices.

Among those who have heard about it, Kamal Bali, a 35-year-old businessman, commented, “Personally, I’m relieved that the law has been issued. It might counter the impact of shop owners who play around with prices.”

But he warned that as long as bribery existed, laws had little meaning, and wondered whether this piece of legislation might be better enforced by a non-government consumer rights organisation.

“Maybe bribery will play its part and this law will become ink on paper, like all other legislation,” he added.

Nawal Ali, a 23-year-old economics student, said it was too soon to judge how effective the law would be, but he expressed scepticism about it, again because of corruption.

“The point isn’t issuing laws,” he said. “It’s how they are implemented.”

(Syria News Briefing, a weekly news analysis service, draws on information and opinion from a network of IWPR-trained Syrian journalists based in the country.)

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