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Racy book on Bangkok pulled from shelves as official suffers attack of prudery

SIMON MONTLAKE in Bangkok

A glossy coffee-table book on Bangkok has been pulled from bookstores after a government official objected to its depiction of the city's infamous go-go bars and other "negative subjects".

The book, *Bangkok Inside Out*, was published last year to critical acclaim and had sold briskly. But in the past two weeks, Thai bookstores have been clearing copies from their shelves after reportedly being warned they could be prosecuted for selling them.

The skirmish over the book, published by Jakarta-based Equinox Publishing, is the latest sign of intolerance by officials of critical reporting and appears to flout the press freedoms guaranteed by the nation's 1997 constitution.

Ladda Tangsuphachai, director of cultural monitoring at the Ministry of Culture, ordered the clampdown and has asked police to consider legal action against the authors, Guy Sharett, an Israeli national, and Daniel Ziv, a Canadian writer based in Jakarta.

Ms Ladda complained to a Thai-language newspaper that the book had focused too much on "fake goods, gambling and gay performances", as well as nightclub zones such as Patpong and Nana.

In particular, she objected to a photo of a foreigner with a bare-breasted bar girl on his lap in one section of the book.

"According to the constitution, the press has the freedom to publish. So all we can do is to take the problematic books off the shelves," she said.

The book's authors have denied trying to besmirch Thailand or Thai culture. They insist they wanted to show Bangkok's unvarnished truths in a playful manner and avoid guidebook clichés. "What mystifies us is that bookshops are packed with publications devoted in their entirety to bar girls and prostitution," the authors said.

The Ministry of Culture has raised controversy in recent years over its objections to Thai women wearing

skimpy tops and frank portrayals of sexual matters in television and movies.

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