

Turkey tightens Internet control in YouTube feud

June 25 2010, By SUZAN FRASER , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Furious over Internet insults of the country's beloved founder, Turkey has gone on the offensive against Google, tightening a ban on YouTube and cutting public access to a host of Google-owned sites.

Turkey's communications minister has accused the Internet giant of waging a battle against Turkey and dodging taxes. But the government faces widespread public anger and attacks from the political opposition for restricting freedoms.

Even the president has spoken out against banning internet sites - using his Twitter account - after Turkey restricted access to some [Google](#) pages earlier this month.

The controversy is a setback for Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government, which won plaudits for carrying out democratic reforms but now stands accused of placing Turkey in the same class as countries already notorious for tight Internet controls.

"If the government doesn't now put an end to the Internet ban that has extended to certain Google services ... Erdogan's name will be remembered along with that of Internet prohibiter Ahmadinejad," wrote Haluk Sahin, a professor of media studies and columnist for Radikal newspaper, referring to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Iran cracked down on free use of the Internet during its disputed presidential election last summer.

Even for Turkey, exercising control of the internet is not new.

The country began blocking access to websites in 2007, after parliament adopted an a law against cyber crime in an effort to curb child porn, prevent the dissemination of terrorist propaganda and stamp out illegal gambling. Websites deemed to be disrespectful of Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, and of religious beliefs were also outlawed.

Under court order, Turkey's telecommunications authority banned access to YouTube, the video-sharing site, in May 2008, after users complained that some videos insulted Ataturk. Earlier this month, Turkey expanded the ban to include some Google pages that use the same [Internet Protocol](#) addresses as YouTube, to prevent users from circumventing the ban. The search giant Google Inc. is YouTube's parent company.

Hundreds of internet users have signed an online petition denouncing the ban as an affront to "free speech and rights to access information." Signatories are calling for the resignation of the telecommunications officials and Communications Minister Binali Yildirim.

Three information technology groups are challenging the ban in courts.

President Abdullah Gul threw his weight behind opponents of the ban in a series of tweets June 14, saying the Internet gag was preventing Turkey from "integrating with the world." He said he has instructed officials to look into ways of overcoming the ban, including changing laws if necessary.

"I cannot approve of Turkey being in the category of countries that bans YouTube (and) prevents access to Google," the president said.

The opposition Republican People's Party, which under new leadership is trying to present itself as a viable alternative to Erdogan's government

in elections next year, brought the issue to parliament Thursday.

"The whole of Turkey is disturbed. Reaction, criticism, protests are increasing by the day," lawmaker Emrehan Halici said. "Unfortunately, we are again faced with censorship in our country."

Yildirim, the minister in charge of Internet issues, responded by accusing YouTube of attacks against Turkey.

"This site is waging a battle against the Turkish Republic but Turkey will never accept it," he said.

He accused Google of failing to abide by Turkish laws and failing to cooperate with Turkish authorities.

This month, Yildirim lashed out at Google saying it owed Turkey 30 million Turkish Lira (US\$20 million) in taxes for revenue from advertisements placed in Turkey.

Google said in an e-mailed statement that it is "disappointed that that this ban remains in place against a safe and lawful international service enjoyed by millions of people around the world."

"Google complies with tax law in every country in which it operates," Google said. "We are currently in discussion with the Turkish authorities about this, and are confident we comply with Turkish law. We report profits in Turkey which are appropriate for the activities of our Turkish operations."

Erdogan has in the past shrugged off complaints over the YouTube ban. In 2008, he told a journalist: "I know how to get around the ban," and urged everyone else to do the same. He would not however, disclose which proxy servers he used to circumvent the ban.

Richard Howitt, a British member of the European Parliament and advocate of Turkey's European Union membership, has warned Turkey that it cannot be considered as a serious candidate as long as the Internet continues to be censored.

Howitt said the ban puts "the country alongside Iran, North Korea and Vietnam as one of the world's worst offenders for cyber censorship."

The 56-nation Vienna-based security and human rights organization has also called on Turkey to abolish or reform the law that allows it to block Internet sites.

More than 6,000 sites have been banned in Turkey according to Engelli Web, a site that monitors blocked pages.

Inaccessible sites include pornographic pages, some online betting sites, escort services and sites that provide live soccer feeds.

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Citation: Turkey tightens Internet control in YouTube feud (2010, June 25) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-06-turkey-tightens-internet-youtube-feud.html>

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