

Signs Syria may be lifting Facebook, YouTube ban

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Syrians check e-mails, chat and connect to their Facebook accounts at an Internet cafe, in Damascus, Syria, on Tuesday Feb. 8, 2011. A media watchdog said Tuesday that Syria appears to be lifting a three-year-old ban on YouTube and Facebook, a decision that could be seen as a gesture to stave off unrest following popular uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia. The Syrian government does not comment on its Internet restrictions. But several Internet users in Syria told The Associated Press on Tuesday that the sites were accessible for the first time in years without having to tunnel through a proxy servers. Lifting the ban may well be an example of such reforms, but it is not a major concession by Assad. The ban had little practical effect, with many Syrians using proxy servers to access the sites every day. (AP Photo/Muzaffar Salman)

(AP) -- Internet users in Syria said Tuesday that Facebook and YouTube were available for the first time in three years amid signs Damascus may be lifting its ban on the popular social networking websites.

The Syrian government does not comment on its Internet restrictions. But several Web users in Syria told The Associated Press on Tuesday that the sites were accessible for the first time in years without having to tunnel through proxy servers. They spoke on condition of anonymity because of security concerns.

The head of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, Mazen Darwish, said he has "semiofficial confirmation" the ban is being lifted. He did not elaborate.

The gesture could be seen as a concession to stave off unrest following popular uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia. But it is not a major compromise by President Bashar Assad, as many Syrians accessed the sites anyway using proxy servers.

Syria has escaped the kind of popular upheaval roiling other Arab countries. An online campaign calling for a "Day of Rage" against Assad's authoritarian regime last weekend fell flat when no protesters showed up in Damascus.

But in the wake of the unrest in Egypt and Tunisia, Assad told the Wall Street Journal in an interview that he will seek to push through political reforms.

Assad, a 45-year-old British-trained eye doctor, inherited power from his father, Hafez, in 2000, after three decades of authoritarian rule. He has since moved slowly to lift Soviet-style economic restrictions, letting in foreign banks, throwing the doors open to imports and empowering the private sector.

Still, Assad keeps a tight lid on any form of political dissent, closely controls the media and routinely jails critics of the regime.

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