

Iran touts domestic Internet as Gmail ban rankles (Update)

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(AP)—Iranian officials announced that they would soon introduce local alternatives to Google and its Gmail e-mail service, even as the country's media and even some officials stepped up complaints over Tehran's decision to enact a ban on Gmail in response to an anti-Islam film, newspapers reported on Sunday.

Last week, Iran blocked Gmail—but not the search engine of the parent company Google—in response to a court order linked to the distribution of a low-budget, U.S.-produced film on YouTube, also owned by Google.

In a country with 32 million Internet users out of a population of 75 million, according to official statistics, that ban has caused widespread resentment. Even many pro-government newspapers have complained of the disruptions.

"Some problems have emerged through the blocking of Gmail," Hussein Garrousi, a member of a parliamentary committee on industry, was quoted Sunday by the independent Aftab daily as saying. He said that parliament would summon the minister of telecommunications for questioning if the ban was not lifted.

The deputy minister, Ali Hakim Javadi, told reporters that Iranian authorities were considering lifting the Gmail ban, but also wanted to introduce their own domestic alternatives: the Fakh ("Pride") search engine and the Fajr ("Dawn") e-mail services, Aftab reported.

Iran's clerical establishment has long signaled its intent to get citizens off of the international Internet, which they say promotes Western values, and onto a "national" and "clean" domestic network. But it is unclear whether Iran has the technical capacity to follow through on its ambitious plans, or is willing to risk the economic damage.

Bans on Gmail and other services like YouTube and Facebook have left Internet users scrambling to find ways to bypass the blocks.

On Saturday, Asr-e Ertebat weekly reported that Iranians had paid a total of 4.5 million US dollars to purchase proxy services to reach blocked sites over the past month.

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