Iran designing software for controlled social media access (Update)

January 5 2013

This file photo shows a customer surfing the Internet at a cafe in Tehran, on January 24, 2011. Iran is designing "intelligent software" that would give citizens restricted and controlled access to banned social networking sites, local media on Sunday quoted police chief Esmaeil Ahmadi Moghadam as saying.

Iran is designing "intelligent software" that would give citizens restricted and controlled access to banned social networking sites, local media on Sunday quoted police chief Esmaeil Ahmadi Moghadam as saying.

"Smart control of social networks will not only avoid their disadvantages, but will also allow people to benefit from their useful aspects," Ahmadi Moghadam said, as cited by the 7Sobh daily.

"The designing of intelligent software to control social networking websites" is underway, he added.

Facebook, Twitter and many other social websites are blocked by an official filtering mechanism as part of Iran's strict Internet censorship.

But many web users in Iran, where half of the 75-million population is connected to the Internet, have found ways around the blocks through sophisticated software known as VPN despite it being declared illegal in Iran.

Ahmadi Moghadam hinted that the new software would allow Iranians to have limited access to social networks.

"Smart control of social networks is better than filtering them completely," he said, without elaborating.

His comments came after the launch in mid-December of a Facebook page dedicated to the country's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei attracted a great deal of attention at home and abroad.

Authorities regularly warn Iranians against the dangers of social websites, arguing they are part of a Western-backed plot to undermine the Islamic regime.

Iran launched a "cyber police" unit in 2011 to confront anti-regime conduct online. But the death of blogger Sattar Beheshti in its custody in November provoked an international outcry, leading to the dismissal of its chief after an official inquiry.

Iran is also working on establishing a national intranet that it says will be clean of un-Islamic content. Authorities claim the "National Internet" would not cut access to the Internet.

Social networks and websites such as the video-sharing hub YouTube were used in organising street protests after the disputed re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009.

Several activists, bloggers and journalists are reported to have been arrested due to their posts and comments on social networks.

The United States accuses Iran of maintaining an "electronic curtain" to cut its citizens off from the world.

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