

Turkish attempt to ban Twitter appears to backfire (Update 5)

March 21 2014, by Suzan Fraser



In this Wednesday, Jan. 29, 2014, file photo, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan attends a news briefing in a ceremony for signing agreements between Iranian and Turkish officials in Tehran, Iran. Turkey restricted access to Twitter on Friday, March 21, 2014, hours after Erdogan threatened to "root out" the social media network where wiretapped recordings have been leaked, damaging the government's reputation ahead key local elections this month. (AP Photo/Ebrahim Noroozi, File)

Turkey's attempt to block access to Twitter appeared to backfire on

Friday with many tech-savvy users circumventing the ban and suspicions growing that the prime minister was using court orders to suppress corruption allegations against him and his government.

Turkey's telecommunications authority said it had blocked access to the social media network hours after Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatened to "rip out the roots" of the website. Tweets have proliferated with links to recordings that appear to incriminate him and other top officials in corruption.

Lutfi Elvan, Turkey's minister in charge of transport and communications, said Turkey was merely obeying court orders—although an Istanbul lawyers group argued the court decisions were about blocking access to parts of websites deemed to be violating privacy—not entire websites.

Turkey in the past has blocked access to YouTube, but this is the first ban on Twitter, which is hugely popular in the country—to the point where Turkish hashtags routinely appear in global trends. The social network was instrumental in organizing flash protests against the government last year.

By midday Friday, tweets were continuing unabated as users swapped instructions online on how to change settings. One enterprising user spread the word by defacing Turkish election posters with instructions on beating censors.

President Abdullah Gul was among those who circumvented the order, which he contested in a series of tweets. Gul, once a political ally of Erdogan, has spoken out against Internet censorship in the past, although last month he approved government moves to tighten controls over the Internet.

"I hope this implementation won't last long," he wrote.

Links to leaked recordings have been popping up on two Turkish Twitter accounts, including one in which a voice resembling Erdogan's instructs his son to dispose of large amounts of cash from a residence amid a police graft investigation. Erdogan, who denies corruption, said the recording was fabricated and part of a plot by followers of an influential U.S.-based Muslim cleric to discredit the government before March 30 local elections.

"Prime Minister Erdogan's move spells the lengths he will go to censor the flood of politically damaging wiretap recordings circulating on social media," said Emma Sinclair-Webb, senior Turkey researcher at Human Rights Watch.



In this Friday, Oct. 18, 2013, file photo, a Twitter app on an iPhone screen is shown, in New York. Turkey restricted access to Twitter on Friday, March 21, 2014, hours after Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatened to "root out" the social media network where wiretapped recordings have been leaked,

damaging the government's reputation ahead key local elections this month. (AP Photo/Richard Drew, File)

Andrew Przybylski, a researcher at Britain's Oxford Internet Institute, said the ban appeared to be working through Domain Name System—or DNS—blocking, which was easy to work around.

He said many Twitter-hungry Turks manually changed the DNS settings on their computers and in their phones to point to Google's Domain Name System, which isn't affected by the ban.

Earlier, many users trying to access the network instead saw a notice from Turkey's telecommunications authority, citing four court orders.

Turkey's lawyers' association asked a court to overturn the ban, arguing it was unconstitutional and violated Turkish and European human rights laws. Turkey's main opposition party also applied for a cancellation.

Twitter's @policy account tweeted: "We stand with our users in Turkey who rely on Twitter as a vital communications platform. We hope to have full access returned soon."

European Commission Vice President Neelie Kroes criticized the Twitter ban in Turkey—a country that is seeking to join the European Union—as "groundless, pointless, cowardly."

White House press secretary Jay Carney said Washington had conveyed "serious concern" to the Turkish government and said it supported the "people of Turkey in their calls to restore access to the blocked technologies."

In Washington, State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said: "Actions like this are contrary to Turkey's own expressed desire to be a model of democracy, to uphold the highest standards of democracy."

The telecommunications authority accused Twitter of violating "personal rights and the confidentiality of private lives" and said access would be restored only when Twitter removes illegal content.

"Turkey is not a country that bans the Internet," Elvan said. "We have to stand together against insults and unlawfulness."

Technology Minister Fikri Isik said officials were holding talks with Twitter and that the ban would be lifted if an agreement is reached.

The original source of the leaked recordings is unclear. The ban comes amid rumors and news reports that even more damaging recordings are about to emerge.

In Berlin, the German government's human rights commissioner, Christoph Straesser, called on Turkey to reverse the decision immediately. Britain's Foreign Office said social media had a "vital role to play" in modern democracy.

© 2014 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: Turkish attempt to ban Twitter appears to backfire (Update 5) (2014, March 21) retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2014-03-turkey-blocks-twitter-access-graft.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.