

Turkey PM says YouTube, Facebook could be banned (Update)

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Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan waves to members of his ruling AK Party (AKP) during a session at the Turkish parliament in Ankara on February 25, 2014

Turkey's embattled prime minister has warned that his government could ban popular social media networks YouTube and Facebook after a raft of online leaks added momentum to a spiralling corruption scandal.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan has already tightened his government's grip over the Internet, generating criticism at home and abroad about rights in the EU-hopeful country.

"There are new steps we will take in that sphere after March 30... including a ban (on YouTube, Facebook)," Erdogan told private ATV television in an interview late Thursday.

Access to thousands of websites have been blocked in recent years in Turkey.

YouTube was unavailable for two years until 2010 because of material deemed insulting to the country's still-revered founder, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.

The site still managed to be one of the most visited in Turkey, with users including Erdogan himself resorting to proxy servers to dodge the ban.

"I can get in (YouTube), you can too", Erdogan famously said at the time, referring to those servers that provided a backdoor to the site.

Further Internet curbs allowed the authorities to keep a record of someone's web activity for up to two years and block sites deemed insulting or as invading privacy.

Erdogan, Turkey's all-powerful leader since 2003, is openly suspicious of the Internet, branding Twitter a "menace" last year for helping organise mass anti-government protests in which eight people died and thousands were injured.

His ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been under mounting pressure after audio recordings were leaked last month in which Erdogan and his son allegedly discuss how to hide vast sums of

money.

The Turkish premier dismissed them as a "vile" and an "immoral" montage by rivals ahead of key local elections on March 30.

A series of other leaks on YouTube showed Erdogan meddling in trade deals and court cases.

Erdogan's government has also been shaken by a high-level corruption scandal that erupted in mid-December and ensnared the premier's key political and business allies.

Erdogan has accused loyalists of ally-turned-opponent Fethullah Gulen, an influential Muslim cleric based in the United States, of orchestrating the graft probe.

The Turkish strongman has responded by purging police and passing laws to increase his grip over the Internet and the judiciary.

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