Turkey Blocks Twitter over Graft Recordings

Suzan Fraser, Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey (AP) — Turkey blocked access to Twitter on Friday after Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatened to "rip out the roots" of the social network where links have proliferated recordings that appear to incriminate him and other top officials in corruption.

Turkey in the past blocked access to YouTube, but it is the first ban on Twitter, which is hugely popular in the country and was instrumental in organizing flash protests against the government last year. Uproar over the recordings has damaged the government's reputation ahead of local elections this month.

Despite the ban, tech-savvy users managed to tweet links to the recordings on Friday. President Abdullah Gul, a political ally of Erdogan's, was among those who circumvented the order, which he contested in a series of tweets.

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

Many — although not all — users trying to access the network early on Friday 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 said it would seek a cancellation.

Twitter's @policy account earlier sent out messages telling Turkish users in both English and Turkish they could send out tweets by using short message service, or "SMS." It was unclear how those tweets would be viewable.

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." Stefan Fule, the EU commissioner in charge of enlargement, said he was concerned.

Lutfi Elvan, the minister in charge of transport and communications, said his office was merely obeying court orders. 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," he said. "We have to stand together against insults and unlawfulness."

Links to the leaked recordings have been popping up on 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 plot by followers of an influential U.S.-based Muslim cleric to discredit the government ahead of the March 30 elections.

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

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