

Turkey's Twitter ban is easily bypassed, but there are no easy answers to Erdoğan's abuse of power

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Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has announced a block on the use of Twitter in the country.

Burcu Baykurt writes that while the actual ban on Twitter is largely unworkable from a technical standpoint, the move is aimed at stabilising Erdoğan's political support base ahead of local elections. More importantly, the fact that the prime minister can implement such a controversial policy under his own initiative highlights the excessive power of the executive in Turkey, raising important questions about democratic legitimacy.



It came only a couple of hours after Prime Minister Erdoğan declared that he would [wipe out Twitter](#) and did not care what the international community said. Many people who are used to Erdoğan's laments against social media did not necessarily assume a ban on Twitter would follow so quickly. But it did. On the night of 20 March, when the screenshots of court orders and various reports of Twitter users streamed through timelines, it became clear that Turkey, with its almost 11 million Twitter users, was officially banned from the social media site.

Erdoğan's crackdown on Twitter primarily targets alleged leaks that revealed cases of corruption against high-level officials. In one of those leaks, Erdoğan allegedly tells his son how to hide vast sums of money when the corruption probe kicked off. In others, he either scolds editors and owners of the mainstream media over their coverage or meddles in the judicial process. He has been lambasting a "robot lobby" – a new addition to the list of nefarious forces that try to take down his government, this time with tweets. It is that robot lobby that he attacks by cutting off people's access to Twitter.

Unworkable ban

What happens when Twitter is blocked by a court order? It backfires in the most spectacular way possible. In a country where people are quite used to workarounds after a YouTube block of almost three years, it only took minutes before various tips on how to circumvent the ban started circulating on social media. Turkey's defiant Twitter users [spray-printed](#) Google's Domain Name system (DNS) addresses on outdoor locations or [scribbled](#) on bank notes to share reliable ways to stay connected. In the first 12 hours of the ban, there was a [33 per cent increase](#) in the number of Twitter messages from Turkey and a 17 per cent increase in the number of unique users. Three Turkish hashtags, plus [#TurkeyBlockedTwitter](#) and [#Twitterisblockedinturkey](#) quickly made it to the top ten trending topics the same night.

Turkey's government has recently [ramped up](#) its censorship by blocking Google DNS, eliminating a backdoor that helped users to stay connected. [Twitter's IP addresses](#) are also blocked now at the ISP level to prevent users from using any DNS services to circumvent the ban. While users are still adamantly evading those blocks by relying on virtual private network services, it is clear that Erdoğan's government will not back off. Recently, during a political rally, he [said](#), "I don't know how sane people can still defend Facebook, Youtube and Twitter," making it quite clear which social media sites could be next on his list.

There may be a legal ban on Twitter at the moment, but it does not seem to have any actual consequences for users – yet. Even the president of Turkey, Abdullah Gul, who is himself responsible for signing a recent bill that made it a lot easier for the government to block IP addresses, went out of his way to [tweet](#) his concerns about the ban. Some AKP officials are [tweeting](#) their support for the ban and announcements for rallies. Not only are many young people skilled at installing programs to get around blocks, their parents – and even grandparents – are becoming proficient

in navigating the technical waters of the Internet.

Erdoğan's polarising rhetoric

Can we then declare victory on behalf of Turkey's Twitter users against Erdoğan's ban? Not quite, as even he is aware that fully cutting off Twitter would not be possible and people would challenge those restrictions (something he [made clear](#) during the previous YouTube ban). Then why is he pushing for it?

First of all, Erdoğan forcefully wants to fight these anonymous accounts on social media that distribute his alleged phone calls, which not only address the corruption probe, but also demonstrate his heavy-handed control overall. Turkey's local elections are around the corner and he needs good publicity – not a series of attacks on his political power and the government. And while you might think banning access to Twitter is not good publicity at all in the 21st century, his supporters beg to differ. Erdoğan's attacks on “global companies” that refuse to comply with Turkey's court orders mean showing “the power of the Turkish Republic” and only solidify his political base.

Erdoğan also thrives on a polarising rhetoric that stigmatises his opponents by moulding them into a single image of the members of various lobbies that aim to take down his government. Banning Twitter is the easiest button to push when it comes to dividing people into camps and provoking them, which, in the end, seems to [work very well for his politics](#).

While defiant Turks on Twitter are [poking fun](#) at the ban in the most creative ways possible, Erdoğan's recent attack clearly demonstrates the overextended power of the executive in Turkey. Last Friday the Union of Turkish Bar Associations (TBB) [filed a petition](#) to the Istanbul Heavy Penal Court to lift the ban. But the court rejected the TBB's file, saying that Twitter was blocked as a result of “an executive decision, not a judicial verdict.” Recently, Erdoğan himself declared a [personal fight](#) against social media and proudly admitted that it was his decision to ban Twitter. So users in Turkey are really at the mercy of Erdoğan's government to have proper access to Twitter again.

In other words, this recent pattern of censorship lays out the disconnect between the resistance of citizens who defend their right to be connected to one another, and executive power that is deliberately unresponsive to their voices. It perpetuates the image of a majoritarian government that speaks for only half of the country while completely ignoring the rest. Most importantly, although people feel empowered by defying bans and launching street protests, Erdoğan's dismissive politics drains their capacity to influence political change.

Prime Minister Erdoğan looks forward to the elections next week as a “vote of confidence” that will further establish his image as a popularly elected leader of a democratic country. However it is highly unlikely that he will be able to maintain democratic legitimacy in the eyes of many people who long ago lost their trust in his governance. Without an autonomous judiciary, a system of checks and balances, and freedom of expression for everyone, all of which will take serious effort and the government's voluntary relinquishment of power, it is fair to say Turkey's political crisis will only get worse after the elections.

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