Turkey blocked access to Twitter Inc. (TWTR) nine days before local elections, as Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan acted on his vow to shut down leaks targeting his government amid a corruption probe.

The move was criticized both within Turkey and overseas, as users accessed Twitter via proxies and other work-arounds. President Abdullah Gul was one of them, posting to his Twitter account that the total ban of a social media platform “can’t be condoned” and that he hoped it wouldn’t last. His comment was retweeted almost 15,000 times. European Commission Vice President Neelie Kroes called Erdogan’s ban a “groundless, pointless, cowardly” act of censorship.

The microblogging service was made unavailable in Turkey hours after Erdogan said the San Francisco-based company had ignored court orders to remove content related to the graft investigation. The prime minister says the leaks are part of an effort by his political foes and “foreign forces” to undermine him ahead of March 30 municipal elections.

Twitter said users in Turkey should send tweets via text messaging instead. Erdogan vowed yesterday to “dig up Twitter and so on -- all of them -- from the roots” at a party rally in Bursa. Last week, he said he could also block Facebook and YouTube, where users have shared material including videos, recordings and transcripts that were first leaked via Twitter.

Erdogan said at his rally yesterday that he wouldn’t pay attention to international reaction.

“When people say, ‘Sir, the international community would say this or that,’ it doesn’t interest me at all,” he said. “They’ll see the power of the Republic of Turkey.”

Anonymous Accounts

Members of Erdogan’s government, including Finance Minister Mehmet Simsek and Deputy Prime Minister Ali Babacan, defended the ban. Twitter shouldn’t assume itself to be above the law and should be sensitive to court decisions, Simsek said today. Babacan said blocking Twitter was Turkey’s “last choice” and the lesser of two evils amid a deluge of leaks violating people’s privacy.

Kemal Kilicdaroglu, leader of the main opposition Republican People’s Party, said the ban was harming Turkey’s image in the world and the party was applying to overturn it.

The tweets targeted by Erdogan are primarily from two anonymous users: one going by the name of
Haramzadeler, a phrase translated by Turkish media as “Sons of Thieves” though it could also mean “bastard,” and another called Bascalan, or “Prime Thief,” a play on words with the Turkish term for prime minister.

**Browbeaten Media**

The leaks call into question everything from the financial probity of ministers to their religious piety, and provide evidence of a media browbeaten by the government. The person or persons have been uploading documents, transcripts and audio files of some of Turkey's most powerful people, including many of the prime minister himself and his family. Some of the leaks are described as the results of a 15-month prosecutor-led investigation into corruption in Erdogan’s government.

Erdogan has responded to that probe, which led to the temporary imprisonment of three ministers’ sons and the head of state-run lender Turkije Halk Bankasi AS (HALKB), by passing new laws, removing prosecutors and purging thousands of police officers.

Speaking across Turkey, Erdogan has dismissed one recording as a “montage,” owned up to another as “natural” and said the entire investigation is backed by “foreign powers,” spearheaded by followers of a U.S.-based Islamic cleric, Fethullah Gulen. The latter has denied the allegations.

**Campaign Trail**

While the authenticity of the recordings and alleged police records leaked online can’t be independently verified, Erdogan and his government have addressed the allegations in a lawsuit, in parliament and on the campaign trail.

Turkey’s Information Technology and Telecommunications Board, or BTK, said Twitter had been blocked upon “complaints from our citizens” and “violations of personal rights and privacy,” according to a statement on its website today.

“The Internet site called Twitter has ignored decisions made by the courts of the Republic of Turkey,” the board said in the statement. “Left with no other choice to prevent the incompensable victimization of our citizens, a preventive measure blocking access to Twitter has been imposed in line with court decisions.”

Nu Wexler, a spokesman for Twitter, declined to comment.

On March 7, Gul had ruled out a complete ban on sites including Facebook and YouTube, while saying that criminal content on the Internet could be blocked. Gul approved a law allowing a government agency to block access to web pages directly, without the need for a court order, last month.

**Lira Declines**

Earlier this week, Erdogan’s party prevented the opposition from reading a prosecutor’s statement outlining graft allegations about four former ministers in parliament. The ruling party’s Nurettin
Canikli said there was no need to read them because they’d been leaked and “everyone already has them in their hands.”

Turkey’s lira has weakened 10 percent since the corruption allegations were made public on Dec. 17 and the stock market has dropped 22 percent in dollar terms, the worst performance worldwide. Turkish two-year bond yields fell to 11.49 percent at 11:51 a.m. today soon after climbing to 11.53 percent, up from a record low of 4.79 percent on May 17 last year.

Local media has reported that the most damaging leaks were yet to come. In a column in the Yeni Safak newspaper yesterday, Hayrettin Karaman, a retired professor of Islamic law, preemptively denied the validity of a tape he said would be aired showing him advising Erdogan on whether Islam would permit him to order the killing of politician Muhsin Yazicioglu, who died in a helicopter crash on March 25, 2009.

‘Hollywood Technology’

Yesterday, a prominent Turkish news anchorwoman denied rumors of a sexual affair with the prime minister. The pro-government media had been warning this week that new leaks would use “Hollywood” technology including silicon masks to make actors look like recognizable Turkish personalities.

While the original investigation stalled, some of the files leaked from “Haramzadeler” have been incorporated into parliamentary record by the opposition.

Last month, Twitter said the Venezuelan government blocked users’ online images, amid protests by opposition groups against record shortages of goods and the world’s fastest inflation. China, which maintains a system known as the Great Firewall to limit its citizens’ access to the Internet, has banned Twitter and Facebook.

India took steps against some social media channels in an effort to contain ethnic violence in 2012, while stopping short of wholesale shutdowns of the sites.

In a message on Twitter on March 19, “Haramzadeler” promised the leaks would continue until municipal elections and beyond.

“These publications will continue not just until March 30, but until Turkey sees the whole truth,” according to the post.

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