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Iran's internet in nationwide 'coma' as presidential polls loom

Access to internet in Iran is being increasingly stifled as next month's presidential elections loom, users and experts have said.

Although authorities deny claims of a government crackdown on the web, a slower internet connection across the country has resulted in many users –including businesses, banks and state organizations - speaking out.

A network supervisor at a major Internet service provider in Tehran said his company had been unable to address complaints about slower speeds, particularly accessing pages using the HTTPS secure communications protocol. "Browsing (the net) is difficult due to the low speed. Even checking emails is a pain," he said, speaking to AFP news agency on condition of anonymity "Sometimes, loading a secure Google page takes a few long seconds," he added.

Iranian press has heatedly reported on the slowed service.

"The Internet is in a coma," the Ghanoon daily said in a report in early this month. "It only happens in Iran: the election comes, the Internet goes," it said, quoting a tweet in Farsi, according to the AFP news agency.

Internet censorship in Iran has increased since 2005 given many users saw it as their "saving grace;" an easy way to get around Iran's strict press laws.

The recent complaints come as Iran prepares to elect its new president on June 14, with fears that the internet could spark violent street protests that social networkers inspired last time around over claims of fraud.

But the authorities reject claims that there is any link with that and the current problems. "Many parameters are involved in the Internet's speed, but the election drawing near is not one of them," a deputy ICT minister, Ali Hakim Javadi, said in early May, according to AFP.

The Iranian regime opponents have previously expressed their heavy reliance on Web-based communication with the outside world.

In March, Iranian authorities took measures to curb internet freedoms byblocking the use of most "virtual private networks," a tool most of its population used to get around an extensive government Internet filter.

A widespread government Internet filter prevents stops Iranians from accessing sites on official grounds they are offensive or criminal.

Article 24 of the constitution gives the state a free hand in restricting freedom of expression, declaring, "Publications and the press have freedom of expression except when there is infringement of the basic tenets of Islam or public rights."

However, the "basic tenets of Islam" and "public rights" are not defined in the constitution, meaning the authorities can use their own interpretation and crack down on free expression at will.

Many users evade the filter through use of VPN software, which provides encrypted links directly to private networks based abroad, and can allow a computer to behave as if it is based in another country.

But authorities blocked "illegal" VPN access, an Iranian legislator told the Mehr news agency. Iranian web users confirmed that VPNs were blocked," according to Reuters.

Iranian authorities had also banned Google's email service for a week last year but reopened access after complaints from officials.

They have also announced plans to switch citizens onto a domestic Internet network which would be largely isolated from the World Wide Web.