

# Turkey's Online Censorship Amid Earthquakes and Elections

A Conversation with Human Rights Lawyer Veysel Ok

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*Social media can be a lifesaver during moments of national significance. As Turkey's May 14 make-or-break elections approach, the crucial role of social media during Turkey's recent earthquake disaster—and the government's efforts to muzzle it—bears important lessons.*

*On February 6, the deadliest earthquake in Turkey's history shook the country, affecting more than 15 million people across 11 cities, killing nearly 50 thousand people, and destroying or damaging hundreds of thousands of buildings. In the crucial hours and days after the disaster, Twitter emerged as the main source of communication for many of the people trapped under rubble or injured, as well as for people searching for survivors and coordinating aid campaigns. Outraged citizens also took to Twitter and other social media platforms to vent their anger at the government's failures, including its shockingly slow disaster response and its promotion of the shoddy construction that led to the collapse of many buildings.*

*Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan lambasted the widespread criticism and vowed to punish all those spreading "disinformation." The threat is serious: Last fall, his ruling party **pushed through** a law allowing prison sentences of up to three years for spreading what prosecutors deem to be disinformation. Rights groups have **warned** that the law enables the state to muzzle critical online reporting and commentary.*

*The government, meanwhile, **blocked** access to Twitter and other platforms for eight hours on February 8, compromising the rescue and aid efforts. Turkey's main opposition leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu **called** the move "insane," while other critics **accused** the government of "killing people on purpose." Veysel Ok, a prominent human rights lawyer in Turkey, **filed** a lawsuit against Turkey's telecommunications watchdog, the Information and Communication Technologies Authority (BTK), over its online blocking, accusing it of "abuse of public office," "obstruction of communications," "reckless killing," and "reckless injury."*

*POMED's **Merve Tahiroğlu** sat down with Ok to discuss his lawsuit against the BTK, the Turkish government's tightening grip on social media, and the implications for the upcoming elections.*

**POMED:** Why did the BTK block access to Twitter in the wake of the earthquake?

**Veysel Ok:** It is clear that the BTK's priority was not to save people trapped in the wreckage; it was to silence criticism of the government's serious deficiencies in search and rescue activities and the broader institutional disorder highlighted by the disaster.

As more than 90 percent of the mainstream media in Turkey is **controlled by the government** or in the hands of holding companies close to the government, many citizens follow what is going on in the country on social media or independent internet platforms. According to the pro-government media, everything was under control after the earthquake. When we looked at social media, however, we saw the opposite: There was total chaos. As accounts from independent journalists and pleas from people in the earthquake zone both made clear, state institutions such as the Ministry of Interior's Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) or the Turkish Red Crescent were nowhere to be seen during the most critical hours after the earthquake, forcing citizens and independent aid groups to take matters into their own hands. But the BTK restricted access to social media so that we would only hear what the government wanted us to hear.

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The BTK first met with Twitter's Turkey office on the day after the earthquake, asking the platform to shut down some journalists' accounts in the name of preventing disinformation. When Twitter refused, Turkish authorities blocked access to the platform for eight hours. The BTK also **blocked** Ekşi Sözlük, Turkey's user-generated "online dictionary" that functions as a Turkish version of Reddit, for its entries about government negligence and deficient disaster response after the earthquake. Ekşi Sözlük, which has thousands of authors and is read hundreds of thousands of times a day, remains blocked.

In addition, the government penalized three of the few independent television stations that have managed to survive in Turkey. The independent Halk TV, Tele1, and Fox TV were the

most-watched television channels after the earthquake. In line with their journalistic responsibilities, these channels bravely reported the negligence of the government, the role of corruption in exacerbating the disaster, and the public's needs. But the RTÜK (Radio and Television Supreme Council), the government agency that controls internet and television broadcasting, **imposed fines** on each channel, citing their earthquake broadcasts as "contrary to the indivisible integrity of the state" and as "inciting hatred and hostility among the public." Such financial penalties are particularly burdensome for these channels because, unlike their pro-government counterparts, they do not receive advertisements from the state or large companies that fear appearing as anti-government, so their budgets are far smaller.

And the government's efforts to suppress critical reporting on the earthquake aftermath went even further: Dozens of journalists faced physical assault, detention, or prosecution.

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For example, journalists Ali İmdat and İbrahim İmdat, also earthquake victims, were **arrested** for questioning why the government had failed to deliver tents that had been donated for earthquake victims. They were detained and charged with “publicly disseminating misleading information to the public.” Another journalist was arrested after reporting that people in the heavily damaged city of Adıyaman were wearing masks to mask the smell of corpses that officials had failed to remove from the wreckage.

And it was not just journalists who faced such censorship. Academics and ordinary citizens also were investigated for allegedly spreading “disinformation” on social media. In the weeks following the earthquake, the Directorate General of the Turkish National Police **took legal action** against 730 social media users over their earthquake-related posts.

**In your lawsuit, you accused the BTK of, among other things, abusing public office and reckless killing. Why did you choose such serious charges?**

The BTK’s choice to shut down communication channels that are critical for saving lives after an earthquake demonstrated that the institution valued preventing criticism of the government over protecting citizens. Thus it is responsible for the loss of life.

In the hours after the earthquake, when official search and rescue teams failed to arrive, people trapped in the wreckage used social media, such as Twitter, to communicate that they were still alive and to share their locations. Based on these posts, independent and volunteer search and rescue teams immediately acted to help these victims. Social media was also used to organize housing, food, and hygiene for victims. The BTK’s blocking of Twitter prevented people from posting messages, interrupted search and rescue activities, and brought volunteer aid to a halt.

As previous earthquakes and scientific reports have shown, the first 72 hours are critical for those trapped in the wreckage. With thousands of people still waiting to be rescued from the destruction and social media being the most functional communication channel for rescue efforts, the BTK’s decision to restrict access to Twitter during those critical hours was surely a crime targeting human life.

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**Was this the first time that Erdoğan’s government blocked social media during a major national crisis?**

No, the government has done this several times before. In many cases, such as during military operations in Syria in **2016** and **2019**, or after the **Taksim bomb attack** last November, the first thing the government did was block access to social media. And after 34 Turkish soldiers **lost their lives** in Idlib in 2020, the government again shut down almost all social media platforms, including YouTube and Twitter, for days. Evidently, the government did not want people to discuss how or why these soldiers were killed. This censorship method gradually became the government’s reflexive response to news or social media commentary that could be politically damaging to the ruling party.

The sole purpose of such restrictions is the monopolization of information. Government institutions follow a clear strategy to make sure that sources of news and information flow only from outlets that are close to the government. This practice helps to manipulate the facts and limits criticism of power.

**Authorities' grip on social media has only grown stronger with the draconian "disinformation law," which the ruling party-controlled parliament passed in October 2022. What is new about this law, and what difference does it make in these situations?**

The new disinformation law is much broader in scope than Turkey's older law regulating libel. With this new law, someone who shares information or news online that challenges the government's narrative can face prosecution and jail time.

The new law allows someone to be imprisoned for up to three years for spreading information online about "domestic and foreign security, public order, or public health" that authorities deem to be "false" and "aimed at disturbing peace and creating fear and panic among the public." Anyone—journalists, writers, experts, NGO employees, or ordinary citizens— can be targeted under this law, as we have already seen in the aftermath of the earthquake. For example, the journalists who said that tents were not delivered were detained under the disinformation law, whereas Turkey's libel law would not have provided any legal grounds for their prosecution.

The disinformation law directly contradicts the articles related to freedom of expression in Turkey's own constitution, as well as the international conventions to which Turkey is a state party.

**Government officials and pro-government media figures have repeatedly claimed that the disinformation law is similar to regulations in several European countries, and they have even cited those regulations as inspiration. Is this true?**

The European laws have very significant differences from the Turkish one. Most important, they do not impose prison sentences for social media users, but rather oblige internet platforms to moderate illegal content. Comparable laws in [Germany](#) and [France](#), for example, are intended to combat hate speech online and entail only content removal and administrative fines, not prison time. The laws cover violent, insulting, or inciting content, and there is no provision for investigating people who spread "false or misleading information." The [United Kingdom's law](#) introduces certain obligations on content-sharing platforms and search engines to protect Internet users, but it has no provision for sanctions or criminal prosecution for content related to journalism.

Greece is one exception. Greece's [fake news law](#) does include a prison sentence, although this law has so far not been applied to areas other than coverage of the Covid-19 outbreak.

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**What impact will the government’s online censorship tactics have on the upcoming elections, and what steps can the Turkish opposition, civil society, and the international community take to try to ensure a free election?**

Authorities’ use of the disinformation law since the earthquake does not make me optimistic about what might happen in the elections. The arrests of the journalists who reported on the tent scandal are a powerful sign of what the authorities might do to muzzle criticism: There is no guarantee that people who challenge officials’ claims or share “unofficial” data will not be subjected to the same legal harassment and investigations during the election process. There is also no guarantee that the BTK will not simply disable or block access to social media before or during the elections on the grounds of “fighting disinformation.”

For a fair election, media and online freedoms are as necessary as judicial independence or the right to campaign freely. Restricting social media during the election process would raise doubts among many segments of society about the freeness and fairness of the process and make them question the legitimacy of the results. I hope this does not happen, but the reality is such that all parties running in the elections must be prepared for any situation and have concrete plans to respond to such risks.

Turkish opposition parties, civil society, and the international community should take the following specific actions to ensure a transparent election:

- 1. LEGAL FRAMEWORK:** Opposition parties must push for a robust legal framework to protect freedom of expression and the press. Throughout the election process, the international community should encourage Turkish authorities not to use Turkey’s laws and regulations to limit legitimate political discourse or media reporting and should make clear that they will be watching for any such abuses.
- 2. MEDIA INDEPENDENCE AND PLURALISM:** The international community should urge Turkish authorities to maintain citizens’ access to diverse opinions and information and document and call out any interference to independent media.
- 3. PROTECTION OF JOURNALISTS:** The international community should urge Turkish authorities to implement measures to protect the safety and security of journalists, including preventing harassment, intimidation, violence, or arbitrary arrest. International media freedom NGOs should work with local civil society to document violations and continue this cooperation after the elections.
- 4. ACCESS TO INFORMATION:** The international community should support local NGOs’ efforts to offer timely and comprehensive access to information about electoral laws, regulations, candidates, campaign finance, and election results.
- 5. ELECTORAL DISINFORMATION:** Local and international NGOs must combat misinformation and disinformation during the elections through fact-checking initiatives and public education campaigns.

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6. **RESPONSIBILITIES OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS:** Social media will undoubtedly remain one of the most important sources of information in Turkey. Considering the risk that the government might throttle social media and orchestrate troll attacks on independent journalists, social media platforms should establish emergency centers to react quickly to such tactics. Unlike the current situation, in which social media companies are not easily reachable by local NGOs and citizens, these companies should make themselves more accessible.



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