

A HOUSE DIVIDED AGAINST ITSELF: THE DETERIORATING STATE OF MEDIA FREEDOM IN TURKEY

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Most international attention has focused on the more than 100 journalists who are now in jail in Turkey as a result of what they have written or said. But more pernicious – and ultimately much more corrosive to freedom of expression – is the widespread self-censorship and the climate of fear, which extends well beyond the media into Turkish society at large. Yet it would be a mistake to hold the government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan solely to blame. The underlying problem goes much deeper and is considerably older than the AKP government. Indeed, it could be argued that the main responsibility for the deteriorating state of freedom of expression in the country lies with the Turkish media itself.



BACKGROUND: The recent rapid rise in the number of journalists being imprisoned in Turkey has led to an increase in international expressions of concern about the deteriorating state of freedom of expression in the country. In its annual Press Freedom Index for 2011, which was released on January 25, 2012, the Paris-based Reporters Sans Frontières (Reporters Without Borders or RSF) ranked Turkey 148th out of 179 countries worldwide, down from 138th in 2010. Despite Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan's repeated declarations that, since it first came to power in November 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been creating

an “advanced democracy”, it was the fifth year in succession that Turkey had slipped down the RSF rankings.

Turkey has never had a fully free press. Although the level of state censorship has varied over time, the authorities have never suffered from a shortage of journalists willing to self-censor or write blatant untruths in order to support the official line. In this regard, the situation in Turkey under the moderately Islamist AKP is little different to the one under the previous Kemalist regime. Arguably more insidious has been the paucity of objective non-partisan journalists dedicated to reporting the truth regardless of self-interest or their own ideological sympathies. As a result, the Turkish media is characterized by the tribalism that dominates much of the political debate in the country; with each side prepared to uncritically accept anything negative about the other – regardless of how plausible or preposterous it might be – and instinctively dismiss anything potentially detrimental to itself as a lie, a conspiracy or a “provocation”. The situation has been exacerbated by imbalances both in the print media and in the plethora of competing television channels, which now serve as the primary news source for the population.

Unlike in many other countries, Turkish newspapers are dominated not by reporters but by columnists. With a few notable exceptions, journalistic standards in Turkey have always been very low. Little attempt is made to substantiate news reports, with the result that rumor and gossip are often given equal status to undeniable facts; something which is aggravated by linguistic vagueness, such as a predilection for sourcing news items to an imprecise “it has been announced” or “it has been claimed”. The situation is arguably even worse amongst the columnists, most of whom merely react to something they have heard or read elsewhere in the media without trying to investigate or assess its veracity. The result is that most columnists generate more sound than sense, using invective rather than reasoning to make their voices heard. It is a similar picture in the television channels, where sensationalist – and often unsubstantiated – reports on the main news programs are followed by “discussions” between commentators with volatile personalities and opposing views; with the result that they invariably generate more decibels than reasoned debate.

Nor does Turkey have a tradition of investigative journalism. What passes for investigative journalism – and which today mostly appears in book form rather than in newspapers or on television – tends to consist of a compendium of reports and rumors selected to support the author’s preconceptions; and is riddled with the same lack of substantiation that characterizes newspaper and television news reports. Equally important is the Turkish media’s extremely short attention span. The breaking of a specific story can create a furor – complete with ever more extreme claims and counter-claims – which dominates the news agenda for several days and then disappears without ever being fully resolved.

Perhaps most disturbing is that the combination of fear and tribalism means that it is extremely rare for Turkish journalists to defend the right to free expression of those with whom they disagree. On the contrary, the tendency is to encourage – and frequently even advocate – the silencing and

intimidation of journalists who hold contrary views. Today, the primary perpetrators are those working on newspapers and television channels owned by supporters of the AKP – particularly commentators in media organs controlled by followers of the exiled Islamic preacher Fethullah Gülen. But in the past, when the previous regime was in power, its adherents in the media were often just as outspoken in their calls for sanctions against dissidents.



IMPLICATIONS: To a large extent, the current parlous state of freedom of expression in Turkey is a result of a change in perpetrators rather than practices. Many of the methods currently being used by the AKP and its supporters to suppress dissent are the same as were used in the past; albeit mostly by a Kemalist, military-dominated state than by a single political party and its affiliated religious networks.

After the AKP's landslide reelection in July 2007, Erdoğan set about consolidating his grip on power by establishing control over the media. In December 2007, the Sabah-ATV group, which had been seized by the state and was at the time the second largest media group in the country, was sold to Çalık Holding, which is owned by one of Erdoğan's close personal associates. When Çalık failed to find the money to pay for the deal, two state-owned banks stepped in to provide most of the financing. ([See Turkey Analyst, June 4, 2008 issue](#)) In September 2008, newspapers owned by Doğan Holding, which was then the largest media group in the company, reported details of an embezzlement scandal implicating some of Erdoğan's

associates at the Deniz Feneri Islamic charity. ([See Turkey Analyst, September 26, 2008 issue](#)) Over the months that followed, Doğan Holding was hit with over \$2.5 billion in fines for alleged tax evasion. Through late 2009 and into 2010, Doğan Holding's media outlets toned down their criticism of the AKP, fired many of their more outspoken columnists and the tax fines were allowed to slip quietly into abeyance. ([See Turkey Analyst, January 18, 2010 issue](#)) The AKP has also brought other economic pressure to bear on media owners, such as by withholding permits and licenses for their other businesses; while also encouraging private companies to advertise with media organs sympathetic to the AKP.

Yet, if the degree and the flagrancy of the economic pressure applied by the AKP are new, its use is not. The AKP's predecessors had frequently bought favorable media coverage by rewarding owners of newspapers and television channels with lucrative state contracts or soft loans from state-owned banks. The main difference appears to be that the AKP's unprecedented monopolization of political power has enabled it to take its use of economic leverage to a level to which its predecessors – which were mostly unstable and short-lived coalitions – could only aspire.

Nevertheless, some of the features of the current repressive climate in Turkey are without precedent. The most striking is probably the degree to which pro-AKP newspapers and television channels – particularly those affiliated with the Fethullah Gülen Movement – have taken the lead in suppressing the expression of opposing views. ([See Turkey Analyst, April 24, 2009 issue](#)) Yet even here they have been able to exploit the existing media environment in Turkey.

For example, the AKP's supporters in the media – often acting in collusion with elements in the police force but without any direct involvement from the government itself – have played a critical role in highly politicized judicial investigations such as Ergenekon and Sledgehammer, in which a total of nearly 700 people have been charged with membership of clandestine networks committed to fomenting a military coup. Ever since the cases were first launched, pro-AKP media outlets have produced a stream of allegations about the accused, often claiming to quote the indictments or cite "discoveries" by the prosecutors and police investigators – including numerous distortions and simple untruths. They have also been the main driving force behind the public smear campaigns against those who have questioned or criticized the investigations; including the publication of details of their private lives, often based on wiretaps apparently provided to them by the police. In some instances, these smear campaigns have prepared the public for the victims' subsequent arrest on charges of themselves belonging to the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer networks; in many more instances, they have succeeded in intimidating people into silence and stifling open debate of the cases.

Given that much of evidence adduced in the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer indictments is manifestly clumsily fabricated, it is little surprise that supporters of the cases have tried to prevent them from being scrutinized. ([See Turkey Analyst, 1 March 2010 issue](#)) What is more difficult to explain is why so few opponents of the AKP have done so. Indeed, almost

without exception, attitudes towards the cases appear to have been primarily dictated by tribalist loyalties; with supporters of the AKP instinctively accepting the allegations, opponents rejecting them, and neither troubling to examine them for themselves.

Similarly, during the early stages of the Ergenekon investigation, when most of those who were arrested were right-wing critics of the AKP, more liberal opponents of the government remained silent. It was only in April 2011, when some left-wing journalists were charged with membership of Ergenekon, that their friends and colleagues began to criticize the numerous flaws and absurdities in the investigation. Even today, few journalists in Turkey are prepared to question the conduct of the Sledgehammer investigation – under which 249 serving and retired members of the military are currently being held in prison pending trial – for fear of being accused of being sympathetic to the military; rather than merely concerned with due process and the rule of law.



CONCLUSIONS: It is probably no coincidence that the only time in the last ten years when Turkey has risen in the RSF rankings was during the AKP's first term in power, when the party was slowly loosening the former regime's grip on power before tightening its own. Yet, although many of the recent criticisms of the AKP over its suppression of free speech in Turkey are undoubtedly justified, the problem goes much deeper. In many ways, it is the environment perpetuated by the Turkish media which has enabled Erdoğan to exercise his authoritarian instincts.

The consistency with which members of the Turkish media have continued to give equal weight to fact, gossip, allegation and unsubstantiated rumor – and even knowingly disseminated untruths for the sake of personal, commercial

or ideological self-interest – has created an environment in which much is believed but little is trusted. This in turn has further exacerbated Turkish society's already alarming appetite for conspiracy theories and made it even easier for journalists and government critics to be imprisoned on other pretexts. Perhaps more frustrating is that, for all its weaknesses, the AKP is sensitive about its image both domestically and abroad. If members of the Turkish media had stood together and defended the rights of others to express opinions different to their own, the AKP would never have dared to act as it has.

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