



What Is Really Happening to Turkish Media?

By Mustafa Akyol April 26, 2016

The crackdown on Turkey’s media freedom has become notorious across the globe. Yet the exact mechanisms behind this problem, and the political purposes they serve, are not always apparent. This essay offers a snapshot of what is happening to the Turkish media and what it means for the future of Turkish democracy.

Here are the basics: Over the past 10 years, dozens of Turkish journalists have been jailed for months or sometimes years.¹ Meanwhile, hundreds of others have been pushed out of their jobs for reasons other than the normal dynamics of journalism.² And despite their diverse ideological backgrounds, all of these unlucky journalists had one simple common trait: They were critical of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his political movement led by the incumbent Justice and Development Party, or AKP. The mechanisms behind this crackdown operate on both the legal level and the political-economic level.

On the legal level, journalists are prosecuted and sometimes jailed for various so-called crimes. These crimes have nothing to do with journalism, government spokespeople typically insist in the face of criticisms, but are serious offenses such as “being a member of terrorist organization,”³ “spreading terrorist propaganda,”⁴ or “taking part in a coup plot.”⁵ These alleged crimes, however, are committed only through headlines, news stories, or op-eds that supposedly help terrorists and coup makers—all, of course, adversaries of President Erdoğan.

To their credit, President Erdoğan and his supporters did not invent this self-styled technique of punishing journalism by calling it by another name. It has a long precedent in Turkish legal history, where thought crimes—such as “separatism” or “insulting Turkishness”—have been penalized for decades.⁶ Moreover, in the first decade of this century, Erdoğan and his party had a powerful ally that helped them both justify and execute these witch hunts: the Gülen Movement, which is both a civil society force and a political actor in Turkey. Movement members in the bureaucracy and the media spearheaded the imprisonment of certain secular journalists—such as Mustafa Balbay,

Tuncay Özkan, Nedim Şener, Ahmet Şık, Soner Yalçın, and many more⁷—as the propaganda branch of a supposed coup plot against Erdoğan’s AKP. In an amazing irony, however, several Gülen-affiliated journalists found themselves in jail after 2014, when they turned into Erdoğan’s new nemesis as the so-called propaganda branch of a new coup plot.⁸ Hence, this case offers a historic lesson for all: Do not help establish a draconian precedent that may turn against you someday.

The most recent example of punishing journalism by calling it by another name was the case of Can Dündar and Erdem Gül, the top two editors of *Cumhuriyet*, a secular, leftist daily paper. In May 2015, *Cumhuriyet* published photos of Turkish intelligence trucks carrying weapons into Syria—arguably to moderate Islamist rebels—unveiling a job that the government apparently wanted to execute in secret.⁹ It was similar to the Iran-Contra scandal, about which the American media wrote freely. Yet President Erdoğan called *Cumhuriyet*’s exposure an act of espionage, and a likeminded prosecutor soon put the two journalists in jail, asking for life imprisonment.¹⁰ Moreover, when the Constitutional Court of Turkey released the two journalists after 92 days in jail and decreed that their rights had been violated,¹¹ Erdoğan accused the high court of ruling “against the country and its people” and questioned “its existence and its legitimacy.”¹² Consequently, if Turkey will really have a future constitution based on a presidential system tailor-made for Erdoğan, one can expect to see the Constitutional Court tamed, if not totally disestablished.¹³

This legal mechanism of cracking down on journalism also includes the crime of “insulting the president,” for which almost 2,000 journalists or ordinary citizens have been prosecuted since Erdoğan was elected president in August 2014.¹⁴ To give a sense of the problem, it is worth noting that these “insults” can include calling Erdoğan a “tin-pot dictator”¹⁵ or sharing photos likening him to Gollum of *The Lord of the Rings*.¹⁶

In the great scheme of things, however, it is not really this legal mechanism that suffocates the Turkish media. The less visible but more effective silencing occurs on the political-economic level, which does not put critical journalists in jail but renders them jobless.

Beneath this problem, there partly lies the fact that most of Turkey’s popular newspapers and TV channels are owned by conglomerates that have delicate business interests. These interests can be lavishly catered to or severely threatened by the highly centralized state, which can give highly profitable state contracts to favored companies or create bureaucratic and legal obstacles to disfavored companies. This allows the masters of the state to follow a carrots-and-sticks policy with the media, which renders it profitable to be pro-government and dangerous to be anti-government. Other politicians have used this tactic before, but President Erdoğan has outdone any known precedent in this art.

As a result, in the past seven years, at least five major Turkish newspapers—*Sabah*, *Star*, *Akşam*, *Milliyet*, and *Vatan*—have gone bankrupt or were forced to be sold. In each case, the new owners of the papers and their affiliated TV channels turned out to be close friends or even adorers of President Erdoğan.¹⁷ These new bosses lost no time in transforming the papers by firing all of the editors and reporters who were critical of Erdoğan and replacing them with unmistakably pro-Erdoğan names. More recently in October 2015 and February 2016, Gülen-affiliated newspapers *Bugün*, *Millet*,¹⁸ and *Zaman*¹⁹, as well as their sister publications, were confiscated by court order and turned pro-Erdoğan overnight.

The centrist daily *Hürriyet*, the top-selling and most influential paper in Turkey, has resisted this tide only to face serious consequences. The first came in 2009, when *Hürriyet*'s owner, Doğan Holding, was given a crippling \$2.5 billion tax fine²⁰ after being publicly condemned by Erdoğan for its “false news.”²¹ In late 2015, pro-Erdoğan protesters stoned the *Hürriyet* building for its criticism of the president²², and a few of them beat its top columnist, Ahmet Hakan, on the street.²³ In March 2016, a prosecutor asked for 23 years in prison for Doğan Holding owner Aydın Doğan due to an alleged tax evasion case from 2001 through 2007.²⁴ Word has it that *Hürriyet* recently committed to be amenable to the president, but its tone was not obedient enough.

All these examples reflect a major trend in Turkey: an increasing domination of the public narrative through the steady transformation of mass media. The apparent goal is to make all media either enthusiastically pro-Erdoğan or cautiously respectful of his persona. A few secular, left-wing outliers—such as *Sözcü* and *Cumhuriyet*—are allowed to exist, for their voters would never consider voting for Erdoğan and his party anyway. But Erdoğan and his team seem to believe that Turkey's right-wing and centrist masses, which comprise at least 60 percent of society, should get their message.²⁵

In a nutshell, this message says that Erdoğan is the great savior Turkey has been awaiting for decades, if not a century. He is destined to make the nation great and glorious again. Turkey is getting stronger under his leadership, and that is why, the argument goes, all the nefarious powers of the world are conspiring against Turkey—in fact, against Erdoğan himself, whose fate is the fate of the country. Consequently, this narrative says, all patriots should stand firmly behind the great leader and loathe the traitors who stand against him. One of the defenders of this narrative aptly named it “Erdoğanism.”²⁶

Interestingly, President Erdoğan and his supporters need all this mass propaganda because Turkey, at least so far, has kept one feature of democracy: free elections. Since they cannot control ballots, they must influence the main channels to the minds of the voters.

Yet all this means that today's Turkey is, at best, an illiberal democracy, where free elections are held but freedom shrinks. Moreover, there are grounds to worry that the near future may be even more bleak. The ideology pumped to society by the ever-growing

propaganda machinery is a militant nationalism sharpened by religious motifs and a xenophobic outlook—in particular, Occidentalism²⁷—that views the so-called traitors at home with outright hatred. This nationalist rhetoric is exacerbated by similarly zealous voices on the opposition side, creating a deepening vicious cycle.²⁸ Such hateful polarization of Turkish society, along with the shrinking of the public narrative, must be a major concern for anyone who has an interest in a peaceful and stable Turkey.

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The views and opinions expressed in this essay are those of Center for American Progress. The Center for American Progress produces independent research and policy ideas driven by solutions that we believe will create a more equitable and just world.

Endnotes

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