

# In a fresh attack on Kurdish democratic rights, UK watchdog shuts down Med TV station

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Within weeks of the mass protests throughout Europe over the forced extradition of Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan, new protests took place in London yesterday. This time protestors were demonstrating against the Independent Television Commission (ITC), the TV watchdog, that closed down a Kurdish satellite television station.

In a statement issued March 22, the ITC said it had "suspended for a period of 21 days the satellite television service licence of Med Broadcasting Ltd (Med TV). Med TV have been informed that they are entitled to make representations within 21 days. At the end of that period, and having regard to the representations made, the ITC must decide whether or not to revoke Med TV's licence."

Around 250 Kurds protested outside the headquarters of the ITC Monday night. Chanting and singing pro-Kurdish independence slogans, the protesters stood in front of three ranks of police officers and vans placed directly in front of the ITC offices in Foley Street, near Oxford Circus. Around half of them remained on the street yesterday morning.

The ITC have been pursuing a campaign against Med TV since 1996. In January of last year, the station was fined £90,000 for what the ITC called "three serious breaches of the impartiality requirements of the ITC's Programme Code".

In a statement of 30 January 1998 the ITC cited the following details of the penalties imposed:

- \* £50,000 penalty for an edition of Jiyana Gel on June 14, 1997, part of a series that aims to depict the social and cultural life of a remote area of Northern Iraq/Kurdistan. The 40-minute long programme consisted entirely of coverage of a political rally

organised by the PKK (the Kurdish Workers Party). No context was supplied and there was no balancing material.

- \* £25,000 penalty for a news programme on October 9, 1997 which included a condemnation, seemingly endorsed by Med TV, of a list of terrorist organisations produced by the United States Government, and which accused that country of branding those who oppose existing orders as terrorists and concluded that the list was intended to "cover up [the USA's] own terrorist activities".

- \* £15,000 penalty for a news programme on June 3 1997. This programme included personal comments from a Med TV journalist in the field describing members of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) as "treacherous and murderous".

The ITC followed this up with a further warning in November 1998, instructing the station that "Med TV must not give preference to the views of representatives or supporters of any political party or parties, including the PKK, and politicians must not be used as news reporters." The notice set a period of six months for changes to be made, ending May 20 this year.

The closure of Med TV is the outcome of a long running campaign against the station dating back to its launch in 1995, but the timing for the shutdown order is more than mere coincidence and could prove politically explosive.

In justifying the first action of this kind, the ITC say that Med-TV is guilty of "broadcasting material likely to encourage or incite crime or to lead to disorder". Director of Programmes and Cable, Sarah Thane, said: "The essence of these recent breaches is that the broadcasts contain calls to direct violence and criminal

actions of various kinds." The main issues cited in all the previous notices, however, is not promotion of violence, but political support for the PKK.

If political bias is reason enough to close down television stations, then few British stations would be operating today in the aftermath of Ocalan's abduction. Mainstream media stations thought nothing of repeating Turkish claims that Ocalan is a "murderer", guilty of "terrorist acts". Nor did they balk at the repeated demands for the death penalty for the Kurdish leader.

While claiming that its decision was made "purely on legal grounds", the ITC has admitted that it received calls from Turkish authorities to revoke the license.

Med TV's web site carries a report of a conference held at the Turkish embassy in London on March 12, attended by several British politicians and academics:

"A former Conservative Party MP, Michael Stevens, said that the British government had made a mistake in granting Med TV licence, and claimed that it could not be evaluated within the framework of freedom of broadcasting.

"An official from the Ministry of Defence, Kevin Tebbit, said that the British government shared Turkey's concerns over Med TV. However, Tebbit added that the government was not responsible for Med TV and that this was a matter for the ITC", the report states.

The ITC has now taken action on behalf of the governments of both Turkey and Britain. The Foreign Office has supported the decision, while maintaining that the commission had made it independently.

The closing down of Med TV is the latest act in the systematic suppression of the democratic rights of Kurdish people. Letters of protest should be sent to:

ITC, 33 Foley Street, London W1P 7LB  
Telephone: +44 (0) 171 255 3000,  
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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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