

Turkey sentences Kurdish leader to death

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A Turkish state security court in the main southeast Kurdish city of Diyarbakir has sentenced to death Semdin Sakik, a Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) leader, on charges of murder and Kurdish separatism. Sakik has been held responsible for the deaths of 283 soldiers and civilians during 191 attacks carried out by the PKK. His brother Arif was also sentenced to death, which in Turkey is carried out by hanging and requires the approval of parliament.

Turkey has not carried out an execution since 1984. The sentencing of the two PKK leaders is an ominous development for Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan, who is also facing similar charges and presently awaiting trial on the prison island of Imrali. His first hearing is due to begin on May 31.

Sakik was captured inside northern Iraq last year by Turkish soldiers. He was the former deputy to Ocalan, splitting with his leader only months before Ocalan's kidnapping and capture by Turkish authorities. Semdin and Arif had fled to Iraq after the falling out with Ocalan, reportedly over a dispute on tactics. The PKK has struggled since 1984 for an independent Kurdish homeland. More than 37,000 people have been killed in this conflict.

The Turkish parliament, dominated by right-wing forces, is exploiting the arrest of Ocalan to escalate anti-democratic attacks upon the Turkish people. The far-right Nationalist Movement Party is now the second largest parliamentary group following last month's national elections and they are expected to approve the court's death sentence, the first time since 1984 that parliament has approved such a verdict.

In another development not unrelated to the decision on Sakik, a Turkish court sentenced to jail a journalist who had interviewed Abdullah Ocalan in 1993. In an extraordinary decision, only days before the verdict against the Sakik brothers, the court sentenced Oral Calislar, a senior journalist for the daily newspaper

Cumhuriyet, to 13 months in jail.

Calislar was charged with producing written propaganda aimed at undermining Turkey's unity. His interviews with Ocalan were compiled into a book that was banned and copies seized. Such is the widespread outrage at this decision that even Turkey's acting Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit has called upon the country's Supreme Court to reverse the sentence, adding that Calislar was a journalist he had held in high esteem.

Ecevit, however, is himself treading warily. Lacking an absolute majority to rule, he is trying to woo the far-right nationalists to form a coalition government. Calislar's jailing has also been opposed by many media outlets, the mainstream *Milliyet* wrote, "The shame of 'thought crimes' ... does one who interviews a prostitute also become a prostitute?" The writers association PEN protested, saying, "Terrorism cannot be overcome with primitive and anti-democratic laws."

The Turkish government has dramatically escalated its war against the Kurdish minority over the last few months. Ocalan's arrest was followed by the invasion into northern Iraq of 10,000 Turkish troops.

The offensive against the Kurdish people continued onto Turkish soil, when at least 1,500 Kurds were arrested in late March during Kurdish New Year celebrations. Scores of army personnel carriers closed off Kurdish suburbs in Diyarbakir, accompanied by hundreds of police and soldiers, in what amounted to a mini-occupation.

Ocalan's court case has the makings of a predetermined show trial. The case will be heard on the island prison where he is being held, in a specially built courtroom with only a limited number of journalists in attendance and no foreign observers allowed to monitor proceedings. The case will be heard by three judges, two civilian and one military. Before the court case even begins, Turkish government prosecutors have already called for the death sentence to be handed

down.

At last month's court hearing to set down Ocalan's trial date, several of his lawyers complained of being beaten by police both inside and outside the court. One of Ocalan's first attorneys resigned in February, claiming the government was not protecting him from ultra-nationalists who had made death threats against him. The government also arrested another of his legal team, claiming he had PKK connections.

In a 135-page indictment Ocalan is being charged with "treason and crimes against the state and its sovereignty" under article 125 of the Turkish penal code. He is being held responsible for the deaths of 9,818 civilians, soldiers, police and government village guards, killed in the guerrilla war.

The US government's silence on Ocalan and the Sakik brothers and the PKK's struggle for an independent Kurdistan is in sharp contrast to their attitude towards the KLA and Kosovo. Turkey's role as a major NATO player in the bombing of Yugoslavia has ensured that its violation of human and democratic rights against the Kurdish people will not make the US evening news.



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