

A damning report on attacks against free speech in Turkey

Our correspondent
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On March 26, the Freedom to Publish Committee of the Turkish Publishers' Union issued an alarming report on the state of free speech in Turkey. The report lists the large number of book confiscations and prosecutions of writers, editors and translators tried and sentenced in 2006 and the first quarter of 2007. The report is dedicated to the memory of Hrant Dink, a well-known Turkish-Armenian journalist who was killed by a 17-year-old fascist assassin on January 19 in Istanbul in front of his paper's (bilingual Turkish-Armenian weekly *Agos*) office.

The report paints a grim picture of the state of free speech in Turkey and provides a full and detailed list of those who have been taken to court for their speeches, writings, published articles, and even their translations.

The very first line of the report points out that the year 2006 was one of the worst in terms of freedom of speech and freedom of the press, and the same problems persist in 2007. The report warns that continuing attacks on freedom of speech have been accompanied by physical violence, which reached its climax with the heinous murder of Hrant Dink.

The authors of the report are not optimistic about the rest of 2007. They point out that with the beginning of the New Year in January, author Taner Akcam and journalist Aydin Engin were brought to court, and even the funeral of Hrant Dink was the subject of a court case. At the same time, the government has been resisting the calls for the removal of obstacles to free expression, most notably the notorious Article 301. In the report's own words, Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code "was the champion of the year."

According to the report, in 2006, some 293 writers, publishers, journalists, intellectuals, translators and human rights activists were brought before courts. In 2005, this figure was 157. At the moment, 22 dissident

journalists and editors are behind bars.

The report also notes that in 2006, 41 authors and 22 publishers were put on trial because of the 44 books they had written or published. Last year, prosecution of 13 of these "crimes" ended in convictions, while 16 cases are still being tried. The total number of such cases was almost the same in 2005.

The report emphasises that another negative feature of 2006 was the fact that criminal proceedings were brought by prosecutors against translators in addition to authors and publishers. For example, last year, Lutfi Taylan Tosun and Aysel Yildirim, the two translators of US writer John Tirman's *Spoils of War: The Human Cost of America's Arms Trade*, were brought before a court. Claude Edelman of Amnesty International called the case "unprecedented."

Cases involving renowned intellectuals, such as Nobel Literature Prize winner Orhan Pamuk, Elif Safak, Ipek Calislar Ibrahim Kabaoglu, and Baskin Oran, have received some coverage by the mainstream media, and their cases ended in acquittal. However, the plight of victims of many more lesser-known prosecutions went unnoticed, and they were not so lucky.

At the end of the report, there is a full list of books either banned or subjected to court cases. It is clear that books focusing on the Kurdish question are still the main target. However, for the last few years, books about minorities in Turkey (the Kemalist establishment strictly refers to non-Muslim religious minorities such as Greeks, Jews and Armenians as minorities) are also being targeted more and more frequently.

This is a direct result of an ongoing anti-minority campaign initiated by far-right and fascistic forces, as well as by the notorious Maoist/Kemalist Workers Party (IP), supported by the Confederation of Turkish

Trade Unions (Turk-Is). These organisations oppose in particular Turkish accession to the European Union. “Left-wing” components of this criminal campaign present it as an “anti-imperialist” struggle against the EU. In reality, such campaigns have paved the way for the wave of nationalism and chauvinism spearheaded by the Turkish military that has terrorised the country for the last few years.

Particularly since the September 1980 military coup, the Turkish police and the justice system have been dominated by the far right, fascists and Islamists, and the personal tendencies of the jurists play an important role in this respect.

The wave of nationalism and chauvinism, which underlies the apparent rise of attacks on freedom of speech, is a response by establishment political circles in particular to the implications of the Iraq war. As a result of the disastrous US-led war and occupation of Iraq, the country is on the verge of breaking apart, and the Turkish elite is extremely worried about the possible consequences of such a development.

In addition, as the election of the new president of the republic approaches, tensions between the Turkish military and the moderate Islamist AKP (Justice and Development Party) are growing day by day. The AKP enjoys a huge parliamentary majority (354 out of 550 seats), and the president will be elected in May 2007 by an absolute majority of the parliament (in other words, by the AKP) to a seven-year term. The president has the mandate to shape the top echelons of the judiciary and the administrative system. If the AKP persists in electing an Islamist (either the AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan or another Islamist) to the presidential post, then the armed forces will intervene in the process, one way or another.

The “civilian supporters” of the ongoing military campaign against the AKP government—the most important component being the Republican People’s Party (CHP)—are employing nationalist and chauvinist rhetoric and systematically opposing even an amendment to Article 301, as well as any other reforms that would enhance minority rights, particularly in relation to acquiring and retaining property.

The alternative presented by the “secularist” forces is a coalition government consisting of the CHP and the fascist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) following national elections due on November 4.

The report of the Turkish Publishers’ Union mentions the stagnation of the accession talks with the EU as the main reason for the grievous state of free speech in Turkey, and there is a grain of truth in this claim. The almost open rejection of Turkey by the EU has indeed strengthened right-wing, fascistic and nationalist forces in Turkey, especially in the state apparatus. But one should not confuse cause and effect. It is the EU that pressured Turkey to adopt market reforms and used the Kurdish question as a means of pressure. It is the EU where anti-Islamic chauvinism in both right-wing and “left-wing” forms is fostered, leading to Turkey’s exclusion.

US imperialism is the most destabilising factor in world politics today, breaking apart Turkey’s neighbour Iraq, while on occasion openly appealing to the most right-wing and militaristic forces in the Turkish state. The turn to chauvinism and repression is the only answer of the Turkish bourgeoisie—historically weak as it is—to the pressure exerted by European and US imperialism.

In the final analysis, the repressive character of the regime is a result of the decades-long subordination of Turkey to imperialist rule, including the major European powers. The present condition of the country does not stand in contradiction to the “Western world,” but is rather the product of it. The global supremacy of imperialism leaves no room for countries like Turkey, with a belated capitalist industrial development, to undertake an organic democratic development.

In Turkey, only an independent socialist political movement of the working class and other layers of working and oppressed people, based on a truly international socialist programme, can build a just and genuine democracy where authors, creative artists, publishers, and translators can live and work free from repression.



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