

Turkish government intensifies crackdown on media, opposition parties

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This week, an Istanbul court appointed a trustees' board to take over management of the Feza Media Group, the owner of Turkey's biggest-selling daily, *Zaman*, as well as *Today's Zaman* and the Cihan news agency. Riot police forcibly broke down the gate and stormed the building, without bothering to deliver the court decision.

The ruling was issued by the government-controlled Istanbul 6th Criminal Court of Peace, at the request of the Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor's Office, which claimed that the media group acted on orders from the "Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation/Parallel State Structure (FETÖ/PDY)," helping it achieve its goals in its publications.

The prosecutor also claimed that the alleged terrorist group is cooperating with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to topple the Turkish government.

The seizure of *Zaman*, which is affiliated with the Gulen movement, one of the few opposition media outlets in the country, is another unconstitutional move of the AKP government. The Turkish Constitution forbids seizure of printing houses and press equipment.

The term "parallel state" or "structure" is generally used by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the AKP to refer to the Gulen movement, inspired by Turkish Islamic scholar Fethullah Gulen. Erdogan started to use the term after the corruption scandal involving his family members and inner circle within the AK Party went public on December 17, 2013. He claims a "parallel structure" inside the state organised the graft probe in order to overthrow his government. Corruption charges were dropped after prosecutors of the case were replaced, dismissed or arrested, however.

The takeover of the Feza Media Group is only the most flagrant measure in a broad offensive against press freedom in Turkey. Last week, satellite provider

Turksat halted the broadcast of the independent IMC TV station on terrorism charges, allegedly for its support to the PKK, while the trustee board assigned by a government-controlled court closed down two newspapers and two television stations owned by Koza ?pek Holding.

On Friday, March 4, four members of the board of Boydak Holding have also been detained as part of a government-led operation on charges of supporting the so-called "parallel state." Boydak Holding is one of the Turkey's largest conglomerates with an annual turnover of more than \$3 billion and 38 subsidiary companies. It has operations in a number of sectors in Turkey, including energy, furniture and banking.

Baris Ince, a former editor of the *Birgün* daily was also sentenced to 21 months in prison for "insulting" Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his son.

Seeking to justify his crackdown, the Turkish president bluntly declared on Sunday, "The media cannot have unlimited freedom. These reports are an attack on the current president of this country," adding, "This has nothing to do with freedom of expression at all. This is an espionage case."

He openly called for prosecutors to defy the Constitutional Court's February 26 decision releasing Can Dunder and Erdem Gul, two opposition journalists, after 92 days in jail.

Brazenly trampling democratic rights, Erdogan declared, "Turkey is ready to pay compensation for the re-arrest of two journalists if appealed in ECtHR [the European Court of Human Rights]. ... Those prosecutors and gendarmes who stopped the MIT [Turkish National Intelligence Service] trucks are now in jail. Therefore, the precaution [the detention of journalists] is not a violation of freedom of press and expression. Members of the press don't have the right to do anything they

wish.”

The two journalists were arrested last November on charges of espionage and aiding a terrorist organisation, after the publication of video footage on the *Cumhuriyet* web site in June 2015 showing Turkish intelligence service trucks transporting weapons to Islamist groups in Syria as they were intercepted in 2014 by the *gendarmerie* .

Four former prosecutors and seven military staff, including high-ranking officers, were imprisoned after a court ordered their arrest in May 2015 for ordering searches of trucks carrying weapons to Ankara’s proxies in Syria.

At the centre of Erdogan’s calculations is that the major European powers will give him a green light to attack the media, so long as he makes an agreement with them to prevent refugees fleeing the wars in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan from traveling on to Europe.

The tone in this regard was set by German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière. In the run-up to the Turkey-EU summit on refugees, de Maizière bluntly declared, “We should not be the referee on the issue of human rights for the entire world.”

He praised the AKP government for holding Syrian refugees in camps in Turkey, thus preventing them from traveling on to Europe: “Ankara has most recently worked in a remarkable humanitarian perspective. Turkey has taken in 2.5 million refugees from the crisis region in Syria. That deserves recognition, not criticism.”

With this support from Berlin and the European Union, Ankara has proceeded to carry out attacks not only on the media, but also on opposition parties. On Erdogan’s orders, the Justice Ministry has submitted to the Prime Ministry a request for Parliament to remove the immunity of leaders of the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), the third-largest political party in the Turkish parliament.

The lifting of immunity targets HDP co-chairpersons Selahattin Demirtas and Figen Yuksekdog, as well as three other deputies. According to a last statement of the Justice Minister Bekir Bozdog in a TV interview last week, there are 347 such proceedings against HDP members. Hundreds of HDP mayors, provincial administrators and members have been arrested on charges of being members of, or aiding and abetting “terrorist organisations” since the June 7 elections.

The opposition Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) had already applied to the Turkish Parliamentary Speaker’s Office to establish a joint commission to discuss launching proceedings against pro-Kurdish lawmakers to lift their immunity. The MHP has accused HDP deputies of being linked to the “terrorist PKK” and insists that the war on terrorism should include legal actions against deputies who supposedly aid and abet terrorism.

Kemal Kilicdaroglu, chairperson of the Republican People’s Party (CHP), has called for lifting the parliamentary immunity of all deputies.

In December, Turkish president Erdogan declared Demirtas’ and Yuksekdog’s statements calling for autonomy in the predominantly Kurdish Southeast region as a “constitutional crime”, and suggested that they should be stripped of their parliamentary immunity. “Motions [to remove the immunity of HDP deputies] should not be left to rot on the shelves of Parliament. The necessary action must be taken,” he said on February 24.



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