

Turkish government escalates crackdown on opposition as toll of Afrin invasion mounts

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As the toll of Ankara's invasion of the Syrian Kurdish enclave of Afrin rises, along with popular anger over growing poverty, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, led by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has further escalated its police-state crackdown.

Last Friday, the Turkish police detained an additional 154 people, including 16 navy officers, 66 teachers and 72 unionists over alleged links to the July 15, 2016 attempted coup that was defeated by a mass movement, in which more than 240 people were killed by putschists.

This came a day after a prosecutor in the Istanbul 13th Criminal Court demanded 13-year prison sentences for executives and employees of the broadcaster Hayatin Sesi (Voice of Life), accused of "successively propagating for terrorist organizations". According to the indictment, the defendants made propaganda for the Islamic State (IS), the Kurdish separatist Kurdistan Freedom Hawks (TAK) and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), because they broadcast scenes of bomb attacks in Ankara and Istanbul in 2016.

On February 28, the Istanbul 26th Criminal Court imposed an additional jail term of five years and 11 months against the prominent journalist Ahmet Altan for "making propaganda for a terror organization" and "insulting the president," stemming from an article he wrote for a news website years ago.

The court punished Altan because of his description of Ankara's "Trench Operations" against the PKK two years ago, during which 14,048 special army and police forces largely destroyed the Kurdish-populated towns of Sur, Silopi, Cizre and Nusaybin, killed at least 1,300 Kurds and forcing more than 90,000 people, or 22 percent of the population, to leave their towns.

Having attended the hearing via video conference from prison, Altan gave a strong answer to the accusation that he depicted the PKK as being innocent, when he wrote about "children" digging trenches to fight Turkish soldiers.

"You are trying me for saying that 13- or 14-year-old Kurdish children who clashed with soldiers in the Sur district [of Diyarbakır] are children. I won't ask you what I should call them," he said.

The verdict was denounced in an open letter signed by 38 Nobel laureates, including Kazuo Ishiguro and J.M. Coetzee, published by Britain's *Guardian*. Addressed to the Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan, the open letter reiterated the warning made by the Council of Europe commissioner for Human Rights on February 15, 2017 that "The space for democratic debate in Turkey has shrunk alarmingly following increased judicial harassment of a large strata of society, including journalists, members of parliament, academics and ordinary citizens, and government action which has reduced pluralism and led to self-censorship."

In an essay published by the *New York Times* on the same day, Ahmet Altan wrote, "We will spend the rest of our lives alone in a cell that is three meters long and three meters wide. We will be taken out to see sunlight for one hour a day. We will never be pardoned and we will die in a prison cell."

On February 16, Altan, his brother, Mehmet Altan, a self-described "Marxist-liberal" professor of economics and former newspaper editor and four other journalists were given aggravated life sentences for alleged links to the movement led by the US-based Islamic preacher Fethullah Gulen, and accusations that they had been behind a failed coup attempt in July 2016.

The sentencing came on the same day another

Turkish court ordered the release of Deniz Yücel, as a result of bargaining between Berlin and Ankara. The German-Turkish journalist spent over a year in pre-trial detention without an indictment,

According to the Stockholm Center for Freedom, in Turkey there are more than 200 journalists held behind bars, while more than 2,500 journalists have lost their jobs following a media purge in which the government closed hundreds of magazines, newspapers and radio stations under the state of emergency declared after the failed 2016 coup attempt.

Under this continuing state of emergency, more than 110,000 public employees have been dismissed, and hundreds of media outlets, associations, trade unions, foundations, private hospitals and educational establishments have been shut down by governmental decrees. Meanwhile, at least 50,000 people with opinions different—or even contrary—to those of the ruling AKP have been arrested and remain in prison over stereotyped accusations of being a member of, or propagating for, this or that “terrorist organization.”

This also includes members of parliament. Enis Berberoğlu, a deputy from the main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) was formerly sentenced by a court to 25 years’ imprisonment for providing the daily *Cumhuriyet* a video of weapons supplied by Turkish intelligence to Syrian “rebel” groups.

The main target, however, is the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP). On Thursday, a Turkish court sentenced HDP deputy Dilek Ocalan to two years and six months in prison because of her speech at a funeral. On Wednesday, a provincial court in Antep upheld the decision by a lower court that sentenced HDP deputy Selma Irmak to 10 years in prison for “being a member of a terrorist organization” and “making terrorist propaganda.”

Meanwhile, following the approval of the sentences in criminal proceedings against them, on Tuesday, HDP deputies Ahmet Yıldırım and Ibrahim Ayhan lost their parliamentary seats. Ayhan was sentenced to one year and two months in prison for “insulting the president”, and Ayhan to one year and three months for “spreading terrorist propaganda” on social media accounts.

So far, nine members of the HDP have been stripped of their parliamentary status. The HDP now has 50

seats in the Turkish parliament, down from the 59 it gained in the last elections on November 1, 2016, with 10 deputies in prison. Thousands of lower-level local Kurdish politicians are behind bars.

Arrest warrants have been issued for dozens of people who opposed the Afrin invasion and who are accused of “insulting officials,” “inciting hatred and enmity among people,” “insulting the president,” “overtly humiliating the Turkish people, government and the military organization” and “promoting terrorist organizations”. Hundreds of others have already been arrested.

In the largely Kurdish-populated southeast, the Turkish government took control in 89 municipalities won by the Democratic Regions Party (DBP), HDP’s sister party in the region, and suspended their democratically elected co-mayors on the basis of claimed suspicion of terrorism offenses, with at least 70 of them jailed.

In late January, 11 members of the Turkish Medical Association’s (TTB’s) central council were detained because they issued a statement, titled “War is a Matter of Public Health”, opposing the war.

More than 170 intellectuals, including former ministers, MPs, journalists, actors and representatives of non-governmental organisations, signed a letter to members of parliament calling for an end to the Afrin operation and for resolution of existing problems through dialogue.

The witch-hunt against the TTB began immediately after Erdogan accused the association of “treason” and denounced them as “terrorist lovers” in his speech at the Extended Provincial Chairs Meeting at the AKP Headquarters on January 29. “Believe me, they are not intellectuals at all, they are a gang of slaves. They are the servants of imperialism”, he said.

Underlying the escalation in the crackdown on the opposition is the growing fear of the Turkish ruling elite that mounting unrest over conditions within the working class could merge with the opposition to the Syrian war and Turkey’s invasion.



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