

AEJ AUSTRIA CONGRESS TURKEY MEDIA FREEDOM REPORT

By Turgay Turker

The government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan blamed the national and international media for the Gezi Park protests of June 2013, which was suppressed with disproportionate force and police violence. Indeed, this excessive response was typical of the AKP government; and in almost every social protest movement the media have been one of the main targets of the government.

Social media played an important role during the Gezi protests. As a reaction to that, the government introduced bans and restrictions on twitter, facebook and youtube, in violation of Turkey's commitments to freedom of expression.

In the last quarter of 2013, when allegations of corruption involving four government ministers were reported, once again the media was blamed. Various leaked documents indicated that bribery and nepotism were widespread, with privileges being traded in return for rewards, but the Prime Minister, Mr Erdogan, directed his anger vindictively against journalists and media.

The media atmosphere of the country has been continuously poisoned by this anti-democratic attitude of the government.

Encouraged by the high-handed attitude of PM Erdogan and his government, various high-ranking public figures who had come under criminal investigation began to threaten journalists, both verbally and physically. Media and journalists were in effect terrorized.

Pro-government media turned into a key part of the machinery oppressing independent journalists, especially the media which was covering the corruption cases and seeking to hold the government to account. Erdogan demonized several journalists by name during election campaigns, and subsequently the pro-government media made those individuals into the targets of what amounted to a verbal lynching.

The media which did not serve the interest of the government have also been placed under intense pressure by financial means. Tax inspectors were sent to investigate them for long periods, and extremely high fines were demanded from them.

Critical journalists were put under pressure by a variety of means. Media owners were told to dismiss those journalists. Even some of the most popular columnists and journalists lost their jobs. In the year 2014, so far about 1000 journalists have joined the army of unemployed media workers. Several big media groups closed their offices in Anatolia and even in the capital city, Ankara, sacking large numbers of the journalists working in those offices.

Business groups which won large government contracts and were provided with financial privileges were induced to buy up some media enterprises and mobilise them into the service of the government.

As of today there are still 23 journalists in Turkish jails. There are criminal investigations against thousands of journalists, which has the effect of forcing all those journalist into self-censorship.

In the 1990s, Turkey was known as one of the countries with the worst record for killing journalists. In the last ten years, Turkey has consistently been at the top of the global list of jailed journalists. On October 14th , 2014, a terrible murder took place which reminded many of the '90s. In southern Adana province, 46-year-old Kadri Bagru, who was distributing two Kurdish newspapers, was shot dead by a gunman who approached him from behind.

A few days ago, the government-introduced a bill that envisages harsher penalties targeting any protest or dissident movement, by extending the scope of offenses and granting extensive powers to the police. Critics and journalists stress that this poses a severe and urgent threat to basic rights and freedoms, and would further damage and undermine freedom of expression and media in the country. That must not be allowed to happen.