Islamic Authoritarianism and Freedom of the Press in Turkey

The Justice and Development Party (or AKP) has brought Turkey into the 21st century, and has managed to heighten significantly Turkey's status abroad. But its authoritarian tendencies on the domestic front appear to undermine the country's reputation amongst many foreign observers.

Lately, various events unfolding in Turkey have been the focus of a lot of frantic news coverage around the world. Ever since the Gezi unrest of 2013, the figure of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has received his fair share of criticism. As such, his many critics and opponents accuse him of outright authoritarianism, suppressing any opposition and crushing dissent while transforming the country into "the biggest prison for journalists in Europe," as worded by Anthony Bellanger, the International Federations of Journalists' General Secretary.

The various YouTube and Facebook bans over the years only reinforced the impression that the country's AKP-led government has the media on a tight leash. In fact, the majority of press and other media outlets in Turkey are either directly tied to the government or at the very least owned by businessmen sympathetic to Erdoğan's cause and thus really nothing but "propaganda bullhorns." At the end of last month, "Turkey's satellite provider Turksat halted broadcasts of IMC TV at the request of an Ankara prosecutor," indicating the extent to which the Turkish judiciary has basically become beholden to the executive. The television channel was shut down due to allegations of "spreading terrorist propaganda." The Istanbul-based channel "devotes much of its coverage to the Kurdish conflict" in the South-East of the country, but also deals with many "social issues, such as environmental protests, or speeches by opposition politicians that other media are loath to carry." At the moment, the channel is able to continue its broadcasts via the Hotbird satellite, as is explained in great detail on the IMC TV website.

Condemnation and Context

The independent IMC TV crackdown took place on Friday, 26 February, and exactly one week later, "[o]n Friday, March 4th, the leading opposition newspaper in Turkey, Zaman, was taken over by the Government; and on March 5th, one of the other opposition newspapers, Cumhuriyet, reported that Zaman's separate news-service to other news-media, Cihan News Agency, has now also been disabled on the Internet." At present, however, the Cihan website appears to be freely available, and even featuring detailed reports on the forced takeover. Particularly, the brutal way in which the police dealt with peaceful supporters of the paper and its backers received a lot of popular condemnation. Pictures of a headscarfed female Zaman supporter covered in blood after having received requisite police attention were the focus of quite a few acerbic comments written down by opponents of Tayyip Erdoğan, whose own condemnatory comments concerning an alleged attack on a headscarfed female AKP supporter in the aftermath of the Gezi protests have not been forgotten. As a result, this latest attempt by the AKP-led government to control the media was met with worldwide disgust and dismay.

The U.S. State Department spokesman John Kirby said curtly that "we see this as the latest in a series of troubling judicial and law enforcement actions taken by the Turkish government targeting media outlets and others critical of it." While, the Austrian Johannes Hahn, as a senior level EU official, for his part, declared that "we are extremely worried about latest developments regarding Zaman newspaper that jeopardize progress made by Turkey in other areas." And, remaining in the realm of Eurocracy and such, the EU Parliament President Martin Schulz tweeted that
The words used by the Executive Director of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) Joel Simon were of a similar grave ilk: "today's move by the court paves the way to effectively strangle the remnants of critical journalism in Turkey." And even the independent commentator and investigative historian Eric Zuesse echoed these sentiments, while taking his condemnation to another level all together, by means of saying that the "Turkish Government is trying to prevent the Turkish public from knowing that Turkey has been serving as the transit-route by which the U.S. government and its allied Arab oil monarchies (especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar) have been supplying foreign jihadists and weapons (largely U.S. but paid for with Saudi funds) into Syria tooust Bashar al-Assad from power."

Even though the Zaman takeover is a troubling development and bodes ill for the future of Turkey's independent press and news coverage, the above-mentioned critical voices all seems to forget one little thing. Namely that until very recently the Zaman group and its backers were in fact allied to the figure of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the whole AKP venture. The Zaman enterprise is the media outlet of the so-called Gülen Movement, known as the Cemaat (or the Community), in Turkish, or the Hizmet Movement. The Hizmet Movement is a religious organisation led by the "cleric" Fethullah Gülen, who was been in the United States in so-called "self-imposed exile" since the year 1999. The "Hizmet Movement . . . is estimated to dispose of a membership ranging between 3 and 6 million, many households in Turkey are equally dedicated to the figure of Gülen (also called hocaefendi or ‘revered master’) without any formal affiliation however. He has been residing in the US since 1999, where he traveled for medical treatment. At the time, Turkey was governed by a coalition led by the veteran politician Bülent Ecevit (1925-2006) – a left-leaning figure with a particular distaste for religious agitation – and when video footage surfaced that showed the preacher advocating his followers to infiltrate the corridors of power in Turkey, Gülen was summarily accused of trying to undermine the supposed ‘secular’ principles of the Republic of Turkey. The tape shows the preacher literally advising his followers to ‘move in the arteries of the system without anyone noticing your existence until you reach all the power centers . . . Until the conditions are ripe, [the followers] must continue like this . . . You must wait until such time as you have gotten all the state power, until you have brought to your side all the power of the constitutional institutions in Turkey.’ The self-proclaimed ‘secular’ elite in Turkey panicked straight away, and in 2000, Fethullah Gülen was tried in absentia by a state security court – for trying to replace Turkey’s ‘secular’ government with an Islamic one. Since then, Gülen has been residing on a large, rural estate in eastern Pennsylvania – in the Golden Generation Worship and Retreat Center on Mt. Eaton Road in Saylorsburg, PA."

**Fethullah Gülen as a Terrorist Leader**

As Islamist groups and organizations go, the Hizmet Movement and the AKP obviously have a lot in common. But since about 2010, a certain rift started appearing, a rift that became a wide open chasm on 17 December 2014. On that day, a corruption scandal broke implicating numerous high-ranking AKP members and many of their family members. A second probe occurred on 25 December, leading AKP supporters in coming months to speak of an alleged coup attempt on 17/25 December. The charge was led by the country’s then-chief public prosecutor Zekeriya Öz, who in the past has been compared to the Italian Mani Pulite (Clean Hands) prosecutor Antonio Di Pietro. The operations brought many improprieties out in the open, particularly poignant were the shoe-boxes filled with cash, which since then have become proverbial when referring to corrupt affairs in Turkey. In subsequent weeks and months, numerous sound recordings surfaced as well, sound recordings revealing less than savoury traits of many an AKP member. But, in the end, the AKP establishment was able to strike back and turn the tables on those prosecuting alleged corruption charges. The counter-charge was of course led by none other than the ever-s-popular Tayyip Erdoğan, who introduced a new coinage to describe his opponents. Apparently, taking his cue from Ecevit, he started referring to the Gülen Movement as a "Parallel Structure" within the Turkish state, a state-within-a-state, if you will. In the next instance, a true with-hunt ensued and individuals suspected of possessing Parallel tries became subject to prosecution and imprisonment. Zekeriya Öz and his associated Celal Kara managed to escape and have been on the run ever since. The Turkish press reported last month that both men had travelled from Armenia to Germany, before slipping into the Netherlands. Nowadays, the prosecution has elaborated upon Erdoğan's coinage and refers to the "Fetullahçi Terör Örgütü (FETÖ)," or Fethullahist Terror Group. (arguably, a better English translation would be the Gülenist Teror Group).

**Islamic Authoritarianism**

The recent takeover of the Zaman group has to be understood in this context. Following his escape to Pennsylvania, Fethullah Gülen managed to construct a veritable business empire from his retreat, an empire encompassing, for instance, more than a 1,000 charter schools around the world as well as vast media apparatus that includes such popular newspapers like Zaman and Today’s Zaman, in addition to equally popular television channels like Samanyolu in Turkey and Ebru TV, serving Canada and the United States, as well as the Cihan News Agency. As a
result, the AKP and its followers regard the daily Zaman and all of its affiliates as the propaganda bullhorn of the Parallel Structure, the state-within-the-state apparently aimed at undermining the integrity of the Islamist principles of Turkey’s AKP-led government. The Zaman group has indeed been highly critical of the figure of Tayyip Erdoğan and the AKP-led government over the past years, but one should not lose track of the fact that the initial co-operation between Gülen and Erdoğan arguably secured the ground for the laying out of the post-Kemalist path that is currently being pursued by Turkey’s leadership.

The day prior to the government takeover, the daily Today’s Zaman issued a statement expressing concern over “Turkey’s democratic performance” and urging a “return to democracy and the rule of law.” These sentiments may very well have been disingenuous or true-and-heartfelt, but they nevertheless appear to have come just a little too late. One could argue that Tayyip Erdoğan and his AKP would never have reached their current lofty status without the Gülen Movement’s willing help and cooperation . . . As put by Şeyma Gelen, a headscarfed feminist and researcher at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, “[n]ot everyone [in Turkey] is concerned with issues concerning freedom of expression, freedom of the press, the status of women or the concentration of power.” Both Islamist factions were happy to cooperate in previous years, and now that the happy union of yesteryear is no more, the AKP is consolidating its firm grip over the country, while its supporters welcome such actions as appropriate measures that safeguard the country and its traditions . . . or rather its one tradition of authoritarianism that has now seen its full culmination in the figure of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the one and only politician to have successfully reintroduced Islam into the body politic of Turkey.

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