



From corrupt bullies to king's fools

A brief look at the recent history of the media in Turkey

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The incredibly high number of journalists in prison -- 154 as of the time of writing -- which has made Turkey the world's leading prison of journalists and the massive crackdown and layoffs with nearly 10.000 journalists and media workers out of work since 2016 portrays a clear picture of the current pressure over journalists and the media industry.

Behind the scenes, we now know that a process that perhaps renders jailing people unnecessary, had been taking place for a long time. Many journalists who either quit their jobs or were fired during the Gezi protests of 2013 have reported in the books or articles they published later memories of having had to change or cancel articles, headlines, even entire pages to fit orders directly given by then Prime Minister Erdoğan. The government even appointed a commissioner representing its interests to seemingly independent media institutions.

Gülen from supporter to enemy

In Turkey's ever shifting political balances, a crucial year was 2011 -- when it became evident that the Gülen movement and Erdoğan, which were powerful allies in constructing the new Turkey since the beginning of 2000, were now clashing over differences of opinion. Nobody at the time knew they were on the verge of a war that would lead to the 15 July 2016 coup attempt.

The Gülen movement and its media empire - with Zaman newspaper and Samanyolu TV as flagship outlets -- which were once Erdoğan's biggest supporters, along with some 175 media organizations which mostly represented alternative media, have been shut down in Turkey's

state of emergency regime. Dozens of journalists, including those who worked for Gülen media or Taraf newspaper, now unfortunately find themselves in jail. Turkey's powerful media, which could once order around governments, is now busy obeying orders and creating a false universe for Turkish citizens under the powerful embrace of the increasingly authoritarian and corrupt government.

Turkish and Kurdish alternative media are trying to survive under very harsh conditions: in addition to prison sentences, which are extremely frequent, a total of 186 media outlets were shut down under the state of emergency. Needless to say, their equipment and assets were sold to Erdoğan's allies through the same TMSF scheme. Turkey's turbulent history of rising and falling media empires shows that even the strongest is not immune to drastic changes. And when the tide turns next time, the alternative media might as well be the last ones standing.

Exporter of "deep state"

Turkey is the proud exporter of the term "deep state" (*"derin devlet"*) -- now used internationally and very loosely to describe shadowy and unaccountable networks within government or state structures -- to world politics. Although to many in Europe, the concept might sound like a conspiratorial phrase, there is ample evidence in the case of Turkey that such structures exist in the country and that these groups make behind-the-scenes decisions that influence the outcome of many affairs. However, even in Turkey's mystifying power structures, one thing is not open to dispute: when it comes to the media, these days it is just one man who calls the shots.

Since the start of an economic liberalization process in the 1980's, Turkish media have always been in the hands of corporate holdings in Turkey. As argued by academics Esra Arsan and Savaş Çoban in their 2014 book "Media and Power," the mainstream media in Turkey has traditionally sided with the state's interests; constantly shifting its ideological stance to fit the particularities of the day to reproduce the hegemony of power. However, today the media in Turkey has been completely taken over by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and consistently, it has served as a mouthpiece to promote the interests of Erdoğan and his family.

The economic and editorial influence of the Turkish government over the media is so strong that there are days when every daily newspaper -- with the exception of some small alternative Turkish and Kurdish media outlets which are under constant attack by the authorities or by organized groups -- comes out with the exact same frontpage headline. Even television networks which could once cover certain topics with a degree of independence have now succumbed to powerful Turkish President's whims and wishes.

Government appoints its own commissioners

Although Turkish media have always adored power and worked to enhance it, this current picture where the government could even appoint its own commissioners to media groups, was once unthinkable. A handful of media conglomerates -- representing many interests that often might be at odds with public interests as owned by businesses active in key industries from oil and gas or automotive to banking -- owned most of the country's television networks and newspapers. They wielded such power that they could contribute the rise and fall of governments, and even be instrumental in overthrowing them.

Partisanship has always been a defining characteristic of the media in Turkey. Until the September 12, 1980 coup d'Etat, newspapers in Turkey were already classified as socialists, idealists/nationalists, supporters of the national view movement (Islamists) or social democrats, the coup led to a major transformation of this classification. Particularly the 1990s, saw the rise of commercial media, and wealthy business families enter the media sector. Drawing on their power based in various high-circulation dailies, this new big media was able to influence governments to a certain extent. During this period, mainstream media broadcasts and publications were mainly in line with the wishes of the military and was instrumental in the unarmed military intervention of Feb. 28, 1998 in Turkey, which led to the resignation of the government at the time.

Handing over media power to Erdogan

The media changed hands under the new regime of the AKP through the Savings, Deposit and Insurance Fund (TMSF) in 2000, which was founded to enhance the country's banking system after an economic crisis in 2001 that led to the collapse of many businesses, including those of media owners. The TMSF was the main instrumental in handing over the traditionally secularist media power to Erdoğan's family members or cronies. With the sale of the ATV-Sabah media group in 2007, a major uniform pro-government media had been formed. The government made sure that whoever represented the old regime, either toed the line or has to be economically eliminated.

Turkey's new pro-government media elite made use of loans provided by state banks at insignificant interest rates through public tenders whose transparency were questionable. Voice recordings show that they often complained about this "new sort of tax" -- the obligation to buy unprofitable media outlets and transform them to act as government mouthpieces in order to be eligible for upcoming public tenders -- and that they were unhappy about being ordered to "pool in" money and resources to buy media outlets. The move was done to be able to remain in the good graces of the government and continue benefiting from lucrative public tenders.

State funding flowing into TV controlled by government

At the end of the process, in the late 2009s, Turkey's most widely viewed television stations and newspapers, such as the ATV network or Sabah daily -- were either owned or indirectly controlled by the government or the then pro-government Gülen movement affiliated media group. State funding was flowing into these networks.

Although destroying any semblance of independence within the already partisan media was quite a feat, its achievement was facilitated by increasingly "anti-militarist" discourse of the government. This discourse was not about respecting the rights of conscientious objectors or cutting military spending, it was perhaps one of the most valuable arguments that earned Erdoğan and his AKP most of their votes. In line with the European reform requests, the government was advocating a "civilianization" (or demilitarization) of politics in Turkey, which since the founding of the Republic by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was traditionally controlled by the country's powerful military.

The Turkish army guarded the old regime, intervening often - five military interventions over the last forty years and that doesn't include the 15 July 2016 coup attempt or any other attempted coup into the political sphere. Erdoğan and his new media (including those affiliated to the Gülen movement) promised democracy, which started with eliminating all critical intellectuals, journalists and writers from mainstream media groups.

Criminalization of journalists

The media applauded a successful campaign by the government with the help of the judiciary to replace the Kemalist officers in the military with Gülenist or pro-government ones. Anybody who opposed was vilified as a bigoted Kemalist, a coup supporter or a neo-nationalist. The campaign also affected the Kemalist media organizations leading to the criminalization of several journalists and managers working for *Cumhuriyet* daily newspaper or Oda TV website as well as the Kurdish journalists accused of propaganda on behalf of illegal terrorist organizations.

The new media was instrumental in establishing this new order and in convincing the Turkish public opinion to support the case. The *Taraf* newspaper – which wielded significant influence over politics greatly disproportionate to its limited circulation – initiated judicial operations that led to the imprisonment of a large number of military officers, in investigations into alleged coup plots named “Ergenekon” and “Balyoz”. *Taraf* did this through unquestioningly publishing documents that were leaked to them by alleged Gülenist members of Turkish state intelligence units.

At one point, the newspaper even claimed that the NTV station, which still had an image of maintaining a level of independence, downed a chopper in which the ultra-right-wing party leader Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu was killed by making too many phone calls to his mobile phone. This was also a time when critical journalists were being imprisoned -- to the praise of *Taraf* and other pro-government media allies. Corruption reports and any criticism of the government were successfully hushed.

When social network and community media took over

On the first night of the Gezi protests in May 31st 2013, 24 hours news channels, NTV and CNNTürk which were owned by the secularist “old guard” (Doğuş and Doğan media groups) and thus still held a degree of public confidence aired documentaries on penguins as hundreds of thousands of protesters marched the streets of Istanbul while being attacked by police. Social networks and community media took over the public interest and shared the stories censored by the mainstream media. Several journalists decided to quit their jobs and share the stories on their own social media profiles.

But alliances which once were deemed strong as steel shatter; fortresses that once were thought unthinkable fall and unions that once seemed unbreakable come to an end.