Fear, farce and tragedy: how Turkey reacted to the Charlie Hebdo murders

Kerem Oktem describes the narrowing room for satire and free expression in Islamist-ruled Turkey.

Istanbul's major political satire journals have a combined circulation of 160.000 copies. in the last week after the journalists of Charlie Hebdo were murdered in Paris, they came out with the same front cover, commemorating the Paris murders with an empty black frontispiece, save for a speech bubble with the words "Je suis Charlie....". Turkish cartoonists instantly empathised with their slain colleagues, as they know well what intimidation and censorship means. They are fighting a barrage of libel cases brought by members of the Turkish government, and above all, by now President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an. Remarkably, they have found ways to continue their irreverence and mockery vis-a-vis Turkey's political class, even in the darkest moments of the military dictatorship of the 1980s and the Kurdish War of the 1990s. Today, they witness that the space for public irreverence and mockery is rapidly shrinking. Many of Turkey's secular journalists feel the same. There is no country in Europe where more journalists have been murdered or prosecuted than in Turkey.

It is not surprising than that the only newspaper that dared to publish a limited Turkish-language selection of the first issue of Charlie Hebdo after the attacks was the secular Cumhuriyet. It included the cover page with a turbaned man, understood to be the Prophet Muhammad, declaring that he too is Charlie. On the morning of publication on January 14, the public prosecutor stepped in to have the police storm the premises of the paper and inspect the issue before distribution. He only gave the green light after investigators failed to find the new Muhammad cartoon in the pull-out issue. Incidentally, the bone of contention was not printed there, but in two columns inside the newspaper. Ceyda Karan and Hikmet Çetinkaya now face criminal investigations for the alleged denigration of religious values, according to Art. 216 of the Turkish Criminal Code. The full Turkish version of the Charlie Hebdo issue following the attacks was launched online by the internet portal T24, an oppositional news website established by leading journalists, who lost their jobs after government intervention. The most touching of the few solidarity events was probably the commemoration of Metin Göktepe, a socialist journalist killed in the lawless 1990s. In a photo circulated by some leftist outlets, an old woman, her headscarf in disorder, holds a "Je suis Charlie..." placard, while she gently touches her murdered son's grave.

With this precarious situation in mind, it was surprising to see Erdo?an-appointed prime minister Ahmet Davuto?lu among the marchers of the unity demonstration in Paris on January 11. True, with Sergej Lavrov and Viktor Orban he was in the company of leaders who have little love for individual freedoms and certainly no love for the freedom of the press. He also distanced himself from any potential anti-Muslim sentiment by calling it a "march against terrorism" and by an aside against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose policies against Palestine he compared to the actions of the Paris murderers. Davuto?lu's presence in Paris was a cynical ploy indeed. Over the last five years, his Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has overseen a systematic war against press freedom, bullying independent media groups into submission with tax fines and orchestrating unfriendly takeovers of oppositional newspapers by pro-AKP businessmen. The pro-government media now acts as an instrument of AKP power. Friendly newspapers, from the Islamist Yeni ?afak to the right-wing Türkiye and the mainstream Sabah, abstained from declarations of sympathy, or from expressing exasperation over the murder of fellow journalists. Instead, they preferred to condemn the cartoons, and hinted at distant conspiracy theories, suggesting -some implicitly, some quite openly- that the Charlie staff had brought it upon themselves.

The rhetoric coming out of Ankara's faux-Seljuk style presidential palace was no less inflammatory. As if the murders had not happened, Erdo?an lashed out at the journal, suggesting that it incited "hatred and racism" and Islamophobia. He insinuated that the attack was expected by French security services who chose not to intervene and thereby allowed the massacre to happen. Returning from Paris, Davuto?lu condemned the cover of the post-massacre issue and stated that if "someone is printing a cartoon insulting the prophet, that is a provocation."

Turkey's democratic condition is in free fall, and so is what is left of its traditions of free speech. The country's public sphere is being colonised by an authoritarian Islamist government that has shed any pretence of liberal policies and became radicalised by its own foreign policy failures in the Middle East, as well as spiralling corruption at home. For reasons of political expediency, Erdo?an and his government have chosen to see themselves as leading part of a Muslim world opinion that feels injured by the cartoons, even though the victim of injury in this particular case has been established beyond doubt. For those who resist this self-righteous victimisation, life in Turkey will be trying. They will have to defend themselves against the reproach of collaborating with Islamophobes, and they will have to endure investigations, court cases and physical attacks. Theirs is a struggle between a rock and a hard place. It is a crucial struggle nevertheless, and one in which the future of the freedom of expression in Europe and beyond will be decided.

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