

A Turkish journalist's censored plea for press freedom

Kerem Oktem introduces our translation of a column by Hasan Cemal, which his newspaper, Milliyet, refused to print.

Introduction

Hasan Cemal is one of Turkey's leading liberal columnists and belongs to a generation of Turkish journalists who have personally experienced the wrath of the state. No stranger to Turkish prisons, having written about them extensively, nor to attempts to stop him from expressing his views, Cemal is a moral authority in modern Turkish politics. This is a position he built up during his time as Editor in Chief of the Kemalist daily Cumhuriyet (The Republic), with his unfailing columns and a steady flow of books on democracy, state-military relations, military politics and the oppression of the Kurds – in short, on Turkey's history of the present. This position he further augmented with his latest collection of writings on the Armenian Genocide with the eponymous title (Ermeni Soykırımı?), a remarkable achievement, not least considering that he is the grandson of Cemal Paşa, one of the three Ottoman statesmen who were ultimately responsible for the genocide. All his thoughts, and particularly his personal recognition of the genocide, are, no doubt, irreverent and disrespectful towards state power in general and the party in government and its prime minister in particular.

Hasan Cemal's principled stance on freedom of expression brought him into open conflict with the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government recently, when he defended the publication of the minutes of a crucial meeting between representatives of a pro-Kurdish party and the leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), Abdullah Ocalan. Prime minister Erdoğan and his government were particularly reproachful about the incident, which they saw as an attack on the peace process between the government and the Kurdish nationalists, which has been developing in the last few months. For Hasan Cemal, this was good investigative journalism and the publication of the minutes was in the interest of the public.

Free Speech Debate

Thirteen languages. Ten principles. One conversation.
<https://freespeechdebate.com>

Even if it came as a surprise, Hasan Cemal's (not entirely voluntary) resignation in March this year from the mainstream newspaper Milliyet (The Nation), following a phone call from the prime minister's office and two weeks' involuntary leave, did not come out of the blue. Several dozen investigative and critical journalists have lost their jobs in the country's mainstream print and TV media in the last few years of the AKP government. That prime Minister Erdoğan has taken on a public intellectual of such stature, however, does not bode well for the future of freedom of expression in a country which at the same time is witnessing unprecedented steps towards resolving the Kurdish war after thirty years of violence and brutality. Like many of his colleagues, Hasan Cemal may join another newspaper or the less regulated world of e-journalism. The stain on the reputation of the owner of his former newspaper, Milliyet, and on that of the prime minister, however, may be harder to remove.

Below is the translation of his last column, which Milliyet refused to publish. As a consequence, Hasan Cemal handed in his resignation.

Kerem Oktem

Hasan Cemal: As I revisit my column, a few words on journalism...

This column has remained empty for two weeks since prime minister Erdoğan scolded Milliyet in a public speech in the province of Balıkesir, remarking that "your journalism should sink to the ground". The prime minister was referring to the publication by Milliyet reporter Namık Durukan of the secret minutes of a meeting with the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan on the prison island of İmralı.

In his speech, Tayyip Erdoğan targeted me too. He did not pronounce my name but he quoted my words defending the report and independent journalism and singled me out.

I was underlining one of the fundamental principles of my profession. I argued that journalism and the governance of a country are two separate issues, and drew attention to the dividing line that set them apart.

This was what I was trying to convey in a nutshell: In democracies, politicians rule the country and journalists make newspapers!

This is how it works in democracies. It is the freedoms and the universal principles of journalism that define the borders of journalism, not some made up criteria such as national or non-national reporting, drawn from the perspective of political power.

Universal principles of journalism definitely include "responsibility", even though it is very hard to define it. However, this sense of responsibility does not necessarily overlap with the understanding of responsibility expected in government circles, nor does it have to.

Free Speech Debate

Thirteen languages. Ten principles. One conversation.
<https://freespeechdebate.com>

In democracies, journalists and the government can be at odds with each other. They may clash. These clashes can be frequent. Relations can become so tense that they may be about to break. American democracy is full of interesting and insightful examples of such cases of clash. But for the purpose of this article, I will skip that part.

I do not intend to get into the details of the “incident” between Ankara and the Milliyet newspaper after the piece on the minutes of ?mral? meeting. Nether do I want to personalize the issue. It is not the first time that something like this has happened to me. Several colleagues have been down this road before and they unfortunately continue to be so today.

It is useful to point this out. The relations between media groups and the government have always been problematic in Turkey. Groups holding political power have tried to control the media and the community of journalists for a long time, quite often by imposing “red lines” that they have drawn to suit their own interests. They have exerted pressure through economic, political and legal ways.

This constellation has never changed.

The economic interests of media moguls outside the media have often given those groups of political power the upper hand. In other words, the media moguls’ dependence on Ankara for their economic interests or the excessive power of Ankara on economic issues, coupled with the second-class status of Turkey’s judiciary, have made it easy for political elites to establish inappropriate relations with media.

And then there is the media bosses’ understanding of journalism...

It was in early 1990s. I was the Chief-Editor of Cumhuriyet daily. One of the big wigs of Turkey’s business community requested my advice as he intended to launch a newspaper. I quizzed him: “why do you want to launch a newspaper? Do you want to have a “successful newspaper”, in addition to your successful fridge and TV factories and a bank in Europe? Or do you want to launch a newspaper in order to create a new centre of power to schmooze with the government and to outdo your competitors? Is it that you wish to protect your business interests or that you really want to start a “successful newspaper? What is it that you want?”

I have written this before. But the question is still valid today. The problematic arrangement between Ankara and the political elites on the one side and the media on the other is still captured by that question.

But there is more to it. We have to keep in mind the role of the community of journalists, and particularly the “journalism elite” that has often contributed to the derailment of media-government relations and has failed to keep those relations in a legitimate frame.

Editors in chief and leading columnists have failed to defend independent journalism against

Free Speech Debate

Thirteen languages. Ten principles. One conversation.
<https://freespeechdebate.com>

political power groups, against their bosses and even sometimes in spite of their bosses. They have hence also failed to form strong and independent professional associations, which could have done this.

I would like to underline one point here. I am certainly not immune to criticism in my career of 45 years. I will not elaborate on this and I don't want to do so for now.

In order for the relations between media groups and the government, between the government and journalists, and between journalists and the media moguls to become more legitimate, it goes without saying that the community of journalists have to take responsibility. We should not ignore the following:

Siting back and watch events as they unfolded, as if our hands were tied behind our backs, or worse, as if we had lost our interest... Such an attitude of indifference has played a key role in demoting Turkey's democracy and its rule of law to a second class affair.

The higher we hold the benchmark for journalism, the more we own up to the values of independence and freedom in our profession, the more we insist, as in the words of Milliyet's successful Editor in Chief, Derya Sazak on "journalism against the odds", the higher we will set the bar for democracy and the rule of law in this country.

This issue becomes even more important at this historical moment when Turkey is going through a critical period as far as the Kurdish issue is concerned. The higher we raise the bar for a democratic state and the rule of law, the wider the doors will open for peace and reconciliation.

The more we excel in our profession as journalists, the more the journalist, the media boss, the politician stick to their respective briefs, without any doubt, the more we will be relieved and at ease with living in a real democracy.

As a journalist who has been truly committed to the profession for many years, and despite many setbacks and shortcomings, I look to the future with hope.

My determination has been strengthened by what I have witnessed in the last two weeks.

Now, let's get back to work and do our job better.

I cannot help thinking that I could have penned a better article as I conclude my first piece after an obligatory two-week break.

This column was published online after his newspaper Milliyet refused publication. It was consequently also published in the newspaper Taraf on the day it was supposed to be published in Milliyet, 19 March 2013.

Free Speech Debate

Thirteen languages. Ten principles. One conversation.
<https://freespeechdebate.com>

Published on: April 12, 2013