

A Turkish newspaper is shut down, condolences accepted

Ezgi Basaran cries out at the forced end of Radikal, the Turkish newspaper she used to edit.



A colleague of mine put it this way: “It’s like we lost our house.” Friends are extending their condolences through phone calls, emails and text messages filled with crying emoticons. No, we have not actually been evicted from our house, nor did we lose a family member. But we, as journalists in Turkey, have lost something that was very dear to us and are experiencing a feeling as agonising as the loss of a loved one.

Radikal, the newspaper for which I worked for half of my career in journalism, announced that it would shut down as of 25 March 2016, after 20 years of operation. Doğan Group, the company which owned it, declared that the closure was due to financial reasons. It was no secret that Radikal, a serious liberal left newspaper, was struggling financially even after it ceased its print version and went digital-only in 2014. But it was always the case that it had to be financially subsidised by Hürriyet, the mainstream daily newspaper also owned by the Doğan Group. So the crucial question is why has it closed down now?

Since it was founded in 1996, Radikal had aimed to undertake good investigative journalism and to serve as a platform for strong ideas and opinions. It occupied a special place for the secular elite, intelligentsia and members of the arts and culture scene in Turkey, by keeping to these founding promises. For a long time, Radikal and its opinion supplement Radikal İki were the only places

where taboo subjects such as the Armenian issue, Kurdish issue, criticisms of Kemalist dogma, human rights violations and promotion of LGBT rights could be discussed in in-depth articles.

During its 20 years, Radikal has done many good deeds both for the media scene and for society: It was the first newspaper that exposed the deep-state network after a car crash in Susurluk in 1996 in which a long-time wanted criminal, a police chief and a prominent MP were caught together. For years, it reported extensively on human rights violations, torture and ill-treatment by police, and on the persecution of religious minorities and non-believers. It was the only online news outlet that reported that Turkish jets had bombed 40 Kurdish villagers in Uludere (Roboski) while the rest of the mainstream media could only refer to the massacre as “an event by the Northern Iraqi border.” Although it constantly supported civilian control over the Turkish military, it also published news stories about the fabrication of evidence by the Gulen movement in major cases like the so-called Ergenekon and Sledgehammer in which more than 300 army officers were charged with conspiring to launch a coup to topple President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. After years of imprisonment, they were all acquitted by a high court based on facts that Radikal helped to uncover. Radikal disclosed and followed up on an ISIS cell in Adıyaman whose members turned out to be the suicide bombers of Diyarbakir (5 June 2015), of Suruc (23 July 2015) and of Ankara (10 October 2015) attacks. There were many more journalistic achievements of Radikal but these provide the main picture.

I led the newspaper as editor-in-chief from 2014 to January 2016 and I can say that we always stood on the side of journalism when Turkey was going through major political tensions and transitions. Sadly, it is a luxury nowadays in Turkey to even say that “we did good journalism” since the media scene has become so polluted with pro-government propaganda and is suffocating under enormous pressure. Yes, we could have done better but we did well.

As one of our editors said, “It is not only the end of Radikal but also the end of an era.” An era in which freedom of expression, even though it was partially limited due to Turkey’s very imperfect democracy, could be exercised. Now, any criticism of the Justice and Development Party (Turkish acronym: AKP) government or of the people closely tied to them can end in imprisonment. Hundreds of people have been charged with insulting President Erdoğan via a Facebook post or a tweet. Among them are renowned columnists of Radikal and Hürriyet, Ertugrul Ozkok, Cengiz Candar and Hasan Cemal. Turkish justice has become “AKP justice” since the judiciary faced a government crackdown and changed hands from members of the Gulen movement to members of the upper echelons of the AKP.

Doing journalism, and being a platform for the ideas of people from all walks of life in this climate, where journalists and academics are imprisoned and indicted, was not easy. Therefore I cannot blame the heads of the Doğan Group for a lack of tenacity. What Doğan Group had to endure over the last few years would sound incomprehensible to our colleagues in western countries, but we went through every bit of it.

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Radikal's closure was the result of a series of unpleasant events; and when I say, unpleasant, I mean really unpleasant. To give you a rough idea, I will describe an autumn evening in Istanbul from 2015. On 6 September around 11 p.m., Do?an Group's newspapers Hürriyet and Radikal's headquarters in Istanbul were raided by a group of 200 people with sticks and stones. The attackers broke down the main door of the building and also burned the company flag. The attack came 45 minutes after a live broadcast in which President Erdoğan had accused Hürriyet and the Do?an group of being "immoral people who are distorting his words", in response to the moderator's question about a tweet that Hürriyet had just published. Even though Hürriyet's tweet had included the president's statement that "if 400 seats had been won in the last election, we wouldn't be in this chaotic situation", the president continued with his accusation.

Video footage of the attackers, taken in front of the Hürriyet building that night, revealed that the group was headed by an AKP MP and former chief of the party's Youth Branch, Abdurrahim Boynukalin. According to the video Boynukalin said: "With God's permission, not only the Do?an media, but all the HDP, [PKK](#) (all terrorist organisations) and particularly the terrorist organization of [Gulen] will get the hell out of here after we make you [Erdoğan] the president. And no matter what the outcome is in the election, we will make you president." He also vowed that their violent protests would continue.

Obviously his promise was heartfelt, because a day later, on 7 September, the Hürriyet building was attacked for a second time at midnight. The main door was again broken down and guards could only prevent some of the attackers from getting in with difficulty. A video of this second attack showed some police officers trying to prevent their colleagues from containing the attackers' violent acts. Even though it was made public that the Hürriyet attack was orchestrated by an AKP MP, neither the president nor the party officially condemned Boynukalin. It was obvious that his acts were tacitly condoned by the party and indeed by the government.

Do?an Group had endured sham trials and astronomical tax fines (\$2.7bn to be exact) as part of an 8-year-long campaign of media silencing. But these two attacks showed that the long-haul campaign had advanced to be life-threatening.

The slandering and targeting of Do?an Group members and journalists continued flat out through pro-government dailies, television channels and paid social media agents known as AKP trolls. Two weeks after the assaults on our headquarters, a prominent columnist of Hürriyet was beaten in front of his house and hospitalised. That was when I, along with several other columnists from the Do?an Group, were given state protection for three months, since we were also the victims of the same accusation of "conspiring with the terrorists" by the pro-government media.

This of course is a very small and maybe a mild version of what many journalists working in the Kurdish provinces go through every day. If a well-established mainstream media outlet had to experience these horrible acts, just imagine what have small independent outlets and news agencies been putting up with.

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Now, there is no Radikal newspaper left, which means there will be no strong voice in the mainstream media with expertise on the Kurdish issue, nor one to criticise the failed peace process and atrocities taking place in south-east Turkey. And this is exactly what the Turkish government wants to happen. So yes, we, as the former journalists of Radikal, are right to accept condolences. Another pillar of free speech has fallen in Turkey.

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