

The archipelago of press restriction in Turkey

Emre Caliskan and Simon Waldman explain how Turkey became the world's largest prisoner of journalists.



Turkey's independent media died a slow and painful death, a result of years of co-option, censorship and repression. But critical journalism faded with a whimper and not a bang even before Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power.

In 2016, Turkey was the [world's largest prisoner](#) of journalists. The state of the country's media represents an archipelago of restrictions which formed even before Erdoğan and the AKP came to power.

Ever since the birth of the Turkish Republic, the press faced restrictions and boundaries. This was especially true after the 1980 military coup. From this period until the mid 2000s the military dominated politics. The generals considered Kurdish separatism and political Islam the country's main threats. They accordingly drew red lines as to what could or could not be said. During the

1990s Turkey's Southeast resembled a war zone. But such talk of 'war' was prohibited. Instead it was a low intensity conflict between the Turkish state and Kurdish terrorists working with nefarious outside forces to divide the country.

Anyone who read the international media or reports by international human rights agencies would know that despite the Turkish state's attempt to stifle such reports, in the South East there were many ghastly cases of murder, torture, depopulation of villages and extrajudicial killings. But within Turkey, such news was few and far between. Many of the horrors of the Kurdish conflict remained unreported, especially if they involved allegations of human rights abuses by the state, the military or its clandestine organs. Simply put, the Kurdish issue was a taboo for journalists or even commentators.

During the 1980s and 1990s, owners of Turkey's media, businessmen with stakes in other commercial enterprises, were also obliged to embrace the staunchly secular military's opposition to Islamist political parties. Instead of being committed to fair and balanced reporting, media bosses cowered to pressure, sometimes willingly, to ensure their newspapers worded headlines or stories in a manner that was pleasing to the country's men in uniform. In effect it was Turkey's generals who were setting the news agenda and dictating the language of stories. And they had the 1982 constitution behind them. Drafted under military supervision, it set limits to journalistic freedom so not to undermine national security.

Meanwhile, it is important to note the political and financial relationship between media owners and government officials. The country's 1995 general election is a case in point. A circulation war was waged between Turkey's main media groups through their flagship newspapers, Hurriyet and Sabah. Each paper supported one of the main centre-right parties, ANAP and DYP respectively. The owners of each newspaper calculated that if their paper backed the winning party, the media group as a whole would reap significant benefits. This was important, because during the 1990s, as today, the media was not a particularly profitable business, and it needed to be buttressed with state contracts and loans for other business sectors that media moguls owned.

During the 1990s there were various competing political parties, making it possible to criticise the government. But this process of media co-option with political elites continued into the era of the AKP, and, with the AKP's monopolisation of political power, Erdoğan and the AKP reached a level of influence over the media that was beyond their political predecessors' wildest dreams.

The AKP government rewarded sympathetic owners with soft loans from state banks and lucrative contracts for other business ventures. It almost reached the point where the television and newspaper coverage of some outlets was practically AKP propaganda. During the AKP's first term in the government (2002-2007), outlets such as the daily Hurriyet, owned by the Dogan Group, embraced the AKP as an antidote to Islamist politics and the declining Turkish centre. As a result, in the early days of AKP rule, before they would later fall out, the Dogan Group became a significant beneficiary of AKP privatisation projects.



Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Photo by www.kremlin.ru under a Creative Commons 4.0 license) Image link: <http://bit.ly/2vvhWtv>

The same can be said of the Gulen Movement, followers of the self-exiled Islamic preacher Fetullah Gulen, who the government blames for orchestrating the failed coup of July 2016. When the Gulen Movement and the AKP were on good terms, the movement's media outlets generally towed, if not promoted, the government line. However, when the AKP and Gulen Movement broke ranks, Gulen affiliated media outlets were closed or taken over.

With media bosses co-opted, it was easy for AKP politicians, Erdoğan especially, to publically denounce critical reporters and commentators, silence them or have them fired. Those journalists who had the backing of their media bosses would find themselves [arrested](#) under trumped up and politicised charges of terrorism.

It was under these circumstances that Turkey became the world's largest prison for journalists, who navigate an archipelago of censorship and restriction that has all but destroyed critical reporting.

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