

## **FREEDOM OF PRESS IN TURKEY**

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Nearly 100 journalists are imprisoned in Turkey on terrorism charges. Nedim Sener and Ahmet Sik are among these journalists. They were jailed for 375 days on charges of being "members of a terrorist organization." They were accused of being members of Ergenekon. According to the prosecutors, Ergenekon is an underground terrorist organization which was established to overthrow the government.

The controversial Ergenekon investigation has been going on since June 2007. The first indictment was sent to the court on July 14, 2008. (For more information see Gareth H. Jenkins, "Between Fact and Fantasy: Turkey's Ergenekon Investigation" Silk Road Paper published by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and the Silk Road Studies Program.) Some of the suspects have been in custody for years, waiting a court verdict. So far the prosecutors have failed to procure any conviction. On March 13 Sener and Sik were released from the Silivri high-security prison. Their release sparked an intense debate on the issue of press freedom in Turkey.

Before his arrest, Nedim Sener was investigating the reasons behind the murder of journalist Hrant Dink. Ahmet Sik was working on a book about the powerful Fetullah Gulen movement. Fetullah Gulen is an influential Islamic preacher who lives in the US. Gulen's movement supports the AKP government. Many think that under the AKP government the Fetullah movement systematically penetrated important state institutions like the police and judiciary. "Whoever touches them burns," Ahmet Sik shouted as he was arrested. Sympathisers say the Fetullah movement is a non-political movement promoting education, interfaith dialogue and moderate Islam. Its opponents believe that it is an organization with its own political agenda.

Human Rights Watch had long criticized Turkey for its repression of journalists. *The Economist* characterised Turkey as "A dangerous place to be a journalist." When visiting Turkey in July 2011, US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton urged the government to uphold press freedom. EU Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Füle also expressed concern about the arrest of journalists. According to the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists Turkey's record on press freedom remains deplorable. Presently, on the Paris based Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index Turkey ranks 148<sup>th</sup> among 179 countries. It is just behind countries such as Malawi and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In the 2010 Annual Worldwide Press Freedom Index Turkey had ranked 138<sup>th</sup>. "The unprecedented extension of the range of arrests, the massive phone taps

and the contempt shown for the confidentiality of journalists' sources, have helped to reintroduce a climate of intimidation in the media," the organization said. Journalists criticising the AKP government have been sacked by their bosses. The latest victim was Nuray Mert, a columnist for *Milliyet*.

The AKP government denies that journalists are arrested because of their ideas or journalistic work. According to the government there are no journalists in jail but suspects of terrorism. Turkey's Minister for European Union Affairs Egemen Bagis told the BBC that "Not one journalist," is in custody because of his profession.

Does the release of Nedim Sener and Ahmet Sik signal a softening of the government's attitude towards journalists? It remains to be seen. The EU is putting pressure on Turkey for the release of jailed journalists. Sener rightly asked: "How can I be happy when so many of my colleagues are not free?" "The Prime Minister defines who is a journalist and who is a terrorist, and that's our biggest problem" says Ahmet Sik.

The release of Sener and Sik coincided with alleged deterioration in relations between the AKP and Fetullah movement. At the beginning of February, Istanbul prosecutor Sadrettin Sarıkaya asked the Ankara Prosecutor's Office to summon National Intelligence Organization (MIT) head Hakan Fidan to testify. Along with Fidan, the Istanbul prosecutor also requested that the previous MIT Undersecretary Emre Taner, MIT Deputy Undersecretary Afet Güneş and two other MIT officials testify in the KCK investigation. Fidan is a trusted adviser of Prime Minister Erdogan. The move was interpreted as a power struggle between the Fetullah movement and the AKP. The prosecutor was immediately taken off the case, and a group of suspected pro-Fetullah policemen from Istanbul were reassigned. The government proceeded to introduce a law that requires prosecutors to seek the Prime Minister's permission before summoning MIT officials for questioning.

Turkey's anti-terror legislation is in need of reform. Vaguely worded laws are used to imprison journalists and other critics of the government. Arrests of journalists increase the climate of fear and self-censorship.