

# The Archipelago of Press Restriction in Turkey

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**By Guest Bloggers Simon A. Waldman and Emre Caliskan**

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 Erdogan and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power.

Today, Turkey is the world's biggest prisoner of journalists. The state of the country's media represents an archipelago of restrictions which formed even before Erdogan 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 Southeast 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.

Also during the 1980s and 1990s, owners of Turkey's media, businessmen with stakes in other commercial enterprises, were 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.



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