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Europe/Ex-USSR - Turkey

Gag order

Nearly 70 journalists prosecuted for covering corruption investigation

6 January 2015

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The parliamentary commission that has been investigating corruption allegations involving former Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's cabinet for more than a year decided by majority yesterday not to pursue the investigation into the four former ministers concerned.

This decision has the effect of ending the ban on media coverage of the commission's hearings, which an Ankara court imposed on 25 November and which many of the most critical media had ignored.

More than 70 Turkish media representatives are currently the subject of judicial proceedings for referring to the corruption allegations against these close associates of the former prime minister, who is now the president.

The targeted journalists include well-known TV presenter **Sedef Kabas**, who was detained for questioning in Istanbul on 30 December after sending a tweet criticizing Judge Hadi Salioglu for closing a corruption investigation in October. Her mobile phone and other equipment were seized during a search of her home.

Released on a judge's order despite a prosecutor's attempt to keep her under judicial control, she has also received threats from members of the ruling AKP party.

Mehmet Baransu, an opposition journalist who writes for the newspaper *Taraf*, was arrested for the fourth time on 30 December for severely criticizing Mustafa Varank, one of President Erdogan's advisers, in a tweet.

26.11.2014 Ban on coverage of corruption probe's questioning of four ex-ministers

Reporters Without Borders urges Turkey's judicial system to reverse an Ankara court's political and totally disproportionate decision on 25 November to ban media coverage of the questioning of four former ministers by a parliamentary commission that is investigating major corruption allegations.

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Coverage of this corruption story has repeatedly been obstructed ever since it broke nearly a year ago, triggering a political crisis.

The grounds given for [the gag order](#) imposed by the Ankara magistrates' court on 25 November were the need to protect the confidentiality of the investigation and the presumption of innocence.

The court accepted the need to "prevent any violation of the personal rights" of the four ex-ministers – Zafer Çağlayan, Muammer Güler, Egemen Bağış and Erdoğan Bayraktar – and to "protect their reputation."

After many delays, the commission finally began questioning the former ministers yesterday, when Bayraktar, the former environment and urban planning minister, appeared before the panel. Bağış, the former European affairs minister, is to be questioned today.

"Defamation and violation of the presumption of innocence are already penalized under Turkish law and can be the subject of judicial proceedings if they are thought to have occurred," said Johann Bühr, the head of the Reporters Without Borders Eastern Europe and central Asia desk.

"But banning any reference to this event in advance, even by means of images, constitutes unjustifiable censorship of media coverage. The public debate cannot overlook the fact that four former ministers are suspected of corruption, especially as this case has dominated Turkish politics for the past year."

The story broke when police and judicial investigators questioned dozens of leading figures after carrying out a series of raids on 17 and 25 December 2013. Those detained for questioning included the sons of four ministers, the CEO of a state bank and a construction magnate.

The government reacted angrily to what is regarded as a plot by its former political allies in the Gülen fraternity, an influential religious movement with many members within the police and justice system.

Hundreds of police officers, inspectors, judges and prosecutors were fired during the following months, with the result that the investigation into one of the main aspects of the case was closed in October. Lack of action by the specially created parliamentary commission of enquiry led many commentators to conclude that its sole purpose was to allay suspicion of a cover-up.

The authorities have repeatedly [obstructed media coverage of the case](#) as it continued to dominate the public debate during the past year. Journalists [have been fired](#), critical websites have been blocked and the intelligence services have been given [broad powers](#) to spy on the population.

The gag order issued on 25 November is effective until the scheduled end of the parliamentary enquiry on 27 December, which conveniently includes the two anniversaries of last December's raids. An Istanbul criminal court already imposed a gag order in February on businessman Reza Zarrab's role in the alleged corruption.

Gag orders are becoming more frequent and extensive in Turkey. One [was imposed](#) in June on Islamic State's abduction of 80 Turkish citizens in Iraq. In January, [one was imposed](#) on mysterious trucks travelling to Syria that several media suspected were arm convoys organized by the Turkish intelligence services. A gag order [was issued](#) in May 2013 on the bombings in Reyhanli, on the Syrian border.

Turkey is ranked 154th out of 180 countries in the [2014 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index](#).

(Photos: Ozan Kose / AFP, Bianet)

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