

# Reporters Without Borders

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Europe/Ex-USSR - Turkey

TURKEY

## Ban sought. Turkish authorities try to gag independent media in run-up to elections

22 May 2015

**With two weeks to go to parliamentary elections in Turkey, Reporters Without Borders condemns government harassment of independent media and is alarmed by a request by the Ankara prosecutor's office on 18 May for the prohibition of several opposition media outlets.**

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Sent to the satellite agency Turksat, a communication ministry offshoot, the request concerns news organizations that support **Fethullah Gülen**, the US-based leader of a popular religious movement, above all the national TV stations *Samanyolu TV* and *Bugün TV*.

Condemned by many other Turkish media outlets as well as by Reporters Without Borders, this proposed prohibition would escalate the major offensive that has been under way for the past two years against Gülen and his supporters.

Many news organizations have already been the targets of requests for information from the Ankara prosecutor's office as part of a series of investigations into the Gülen movement. *Zaman* editor **Ekrem Dumanli** and *Samanyolu TV* chief **Hidayet Karaca** [were among the 30 or so people who were arrested on 14 December](#).

If the prohibition goes ahead, it would deal a devastating blow to media freedom and diversity in Turkey. Many commentators are criticizing the paranoia that the government is displaying towards the country's leading media groups and accuse it of trying to "*silence the free press*."

### State TV favouring government candidates

Reporters Without Borders is also disturbed by the way the state-owned national TV broadcaster *TRT* is giving an unfair amount of air-time to the ruling party's candidates for the 7 June parliamentary elections.

With typically flagrant bias, *TRT* had given ruling Justice and Development Party leader **Ahmed Davutoglu** 1 hour and 20 minutes of coverage by mid-April against only 15 minutes for the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP). Reporters Without Borders already condemned a "*toxic climate*" for the media on the eve of regional elections in a press release on 21 March, which also voiced concern about *TRT's* bias. "*We urge President **Recep Tayyip Erdogan** to think again and to refrain from targeting opposition news media,*" Reporters Without Borders programme director Lucie Morillon said. "*With just days to go to parliamentary elections, the authorities must respect media pluralism, which is essential for the elections to take place in a proper, democratic manner.*"

### Growing obstacles for journalists

What with media blackouts, denial of accreditation and constant prosecutions, the authorities have stopped at nothing to prevent journalists from working.

Two journalists with the pro-Gülen news agency *Cihan* were refused permission to cover a public event organized on 21 April by mobile operator AVEA with President Erdogan's wife, **Emine Erdogan**, in attendance.

On Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's orders, many outspoken media were prevented from

attending a funeral on 1 April in Istanbul's Eyüp Sultan Mosque for **Mehmet Selim Kiraz**, the prosecutor who had been killed the previous day after being taken hostage.

Reporters from two news agencies (*Cihan* and *Doğan*), ten newspapers (*Zaman*, *Hürriyet*, *Posta*, *Sözcü*, *Taraf*, *Millet*, *Cumhuriyet*, *Ortadoğu*, *Yeniçağ* and *Birgün*) and five TV stations (*Samanyolu TV*, *IMC TV*, *Kanaltürk*, *CNN Türk* and *Bugün*) were turned away.

This followed the reporting ban that the Prime Minister imposed on the same media while [the prosecutor was being held hostage in a courthouse the day before](#). *The daily Cumhuriyet* filed suit against the prime minister before an Istanbul court on 6 April for 10,000 Turkish lira in compensation for the losses sustained as a result of the ban. The case is still under way.

The daily *Hürriyet* has meanwhile been the target of several suits this month. The first concerned its report on Egyptian President **Mohamed Morsi's** death sentence, which it headlined: "*Entire world in shock after president elected by 52% is sentenced to death.*"

Claiming that it posed a grave threat to President Erdogan, his lawyer, **Rahmi Kurt**, filed a complaint accusing the newspaper of "*inciting hatred*," "*inciting armed insurrection against the government*," "*condoning a crime and a criminal*" and "*propaganda in favour of a terrorist organization.*"

Condemning the complaint as a "*new blow to media freedom and freedom of expression*," the Association of Turkish Journalists (TGC) criticized Erdogan's lawyer for requesting the imprisonment of the newspaper's managing editor, **Sedat Ergin**, and other senior members of its staff.

*Hürriyet* and one of its columnists, **Mehmet Yilmaz**, were today ordered to pay 20,000 Turkish lira (7,000 euros) in damages to President Erdogan for a column criticizing government corruption. The head of the newspaper's board, **Vuslat Dogan Sabanci**, has also been fined 10,000 lira.

### **Authoritarian excesses**

Media freedom has not stopped declining since the *Dogan* media group was the victim of a [government-orchestrated prosecution in 2009](#), which prompted many journalists to start censoring themselves. In the past five years, many judicial proceedings have been brought against journalists for motives that were often murky.

The "[internal security reform](#)" that President Erdogan signed into law on 3 April gave the police far-reaching powers that included the ability to arrest any individual and carry out searches without asking a judge.

Reporters Without Borders reiterates its concern about this law, which opens the way for even more harassment of journalists, who can now be arrested arbitrarily without any judicial constraints.

Turkey is ranked 149th out of 180 countries in the [2015 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index](#).

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