

# Reporters Without Borders

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Europe/Ex-USSR - Turkey

Interference

## Government leaned on judicial system in media holding case

6 March 2014

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Reporters Without Borders is deeply shocked to learn of government interference in a series of prosecutions in 2009 against Dogan Holding, a conglomerate that owns many leading news media.

Telephone recordings leaked on 3 March show that Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and then justice minister Sadullah Ergin intervened directly in these proceedings, which resulted in Dogan being ordered to pay an astronomical fine of more than 3 billion Turkish pounds (more than 1 billion euros).

"The [many revelations in recent weeks about direct government pressure on media owners](#) were already very serious," said Reporters Without Borders secretary-general Christophe Deloire.

"But these latest recordings confirm that the government also tried to use the judicial system in its fight against critical media. The casual manner in which the prime minister has admitted doing this is extraordinary, as it so obviously flouts the principle of the separation of powers.

"This information is all the more disturbing for involving a key case. Dogan Holding's conviction in 2009 set off a wave of self-censorship, [the scale of which could be seen during last year's Gezi Park protests](#). The use of government influence to obtain this decision from the judicial system constitutes an extremely grave violation of freedom of information."

Deloire added: "The government must explain itself in a clear manner on this subject and must undertake to henceforth respect both media and judicial independence."

## A leading case

As well as owning companies in many other sectors of the economy, Dogan Holding is one of Turkey's leading media groups, owning the *Hürriyet* daily newspaper, the *CNN Türk* TV channel and the *DHA* news agency. Several of its media were well known for being critical of the Erdogan government.

When Dogan was convicted on a series of tax fraud charges in 2009, media freedom groups were unanimous in condemning the disproportionate size of the fine, which would have bankrupted Dogan and dealt a major blow to media pluralism in Turkey.

Most of the fine was forgiven after negotiations between the government and Dogan. But, at the same time, several editors of the most critical media were replaced and many journalists resigned in protest against growing self-censorship. Dogan went on to reduce its media holdings, selling the *Milliyet* and *Vatan* newspapers and *Star TV*.

## Government interference

In the first of the recordings posted on YouTube on 3 March, what is said to be the prime minister's voice can be heard urging the justice minister to "closely follow" the trial "of crucial importance" and to ensure that Dogan is convicted.

In another recording, a voice said to be the justice minister's reassures the prime minister, telling him that a definitive decision will be reached on appeal and that he will talk to the

appeal court's president to "ensure that he acts with sensitivity." This voice also says that "nearly 2,000 friends" of the government have infiltrated the judicial system.

Although the justice minister has disputed the authenticity of the recordings, the prime minister had not. On the contrary, he has defended the government's intervention in the case, claiming that he had "very dangerous information" about Dogan at the time and that it was involved in "parallel structures and dirty relationships."

Yesterday, Erdogan said it "natural" and "necessary" that he should have asked his justice minister to follow the case closely.

*(Photos: AFP Photo / Prime Minister Press Office / Kayhan Ozer)*

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