

Free Media Will Save Turkish Democracy

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Articles & Testimony

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Turkey's experiment with Islamists-turned-democrats might be coming to a tragic end. When the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, rooted in Turkey's Islamist opposition came to power in Turkey in 2002 and declared itself a democratic movement, nearly everyone gave it the benefit of the doubt. At that time, the party pushed for European Union accession and followed a liberal reform agenda. The party also reached out to non-Islamist constituencies, suggesting a pluralist understanding of democracy and alleviating concerns about its Islamist pedigree.

Seven years later, the AKP's democratic credentials are under doubt. On Sept. 8, the AKP slapped Dogan Media, Turkey's largest media group, composed of liberal and secular voices, with a record \$2.5 billion tax fine. The AKP has also begun arresting its opponents and critics on the grounds that they are connected to Ergenekon, a group accused of plotting a coup against the government. Turkey-watchers are waking up from a dream that started well in 2002, yet has since become a nightmare for liberals.

The AKP's slide away from its liberal outlook began in 2005. As Turkey started accession talks with the EU, the AKP decided that the talks necessitated reforms that would erode its popular support and thus shied away from pursuing Turkey's EU dream. Following its landslide election victory in 2007 with 47 percent support, the party moved from a pluralist to a majoritarian understanding of democracy. The AKP began to interpret its popular mandate as a blank check to ignore democratic checks and balances as it cracked down on dissent by using the financial police to intimidate liberal businesses and the Ergenekon case to harass its opponents and critics.

When the AKP came to power, Turkey's liberal business lobby group, the Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association, or TUSIAD, whose members control a large chunk of the Turkish economy, supported the AKP's liberal pursuit of the dream of a European Turkey. However, relations between TUSIAD and the AKP soured as the new majoritarian-thinking AKP abandoned consensus building policies -- for instance telling TUSIAD to "shut up" during the 2007 debate on a new constitution.

TUSIAD members have since come under fire from the government-controlled tax police. For example, the Dogan Group, a prominent TUSIAD member, was targeted after Dogan's newspapers covered a court case in Germany that dissolved a Turkish-German charity for the illegal transfer of funds to various Islamists in Turkey. Tax authorities selectively audited Dogan's businesses for a year, levying him a \$600 million fine in February after alleging improper business dealings. AKP leader and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan then called on Turks to boycott Dogan's media outlets, thus exposing the political nature of the fine.

The AKP's stance against Dogan is a move against independent media. Turkish media continues to be free, but its independence is now restricted by a government that wants political subservience.

The case against Dogan is also a move against liberal businesses. In this regard, Vladimir Putin's heavy-handed treatment of his billionaire opponent Mikhail Khodorkovsky is a telling example. When Putin jailed the Russian

businessman on corruption charges, he sent other Russian oligarchs a strong message. Soon thereafter, many embraced self-imposed exile or turned into subservient figures like Roman Abramovich. The AKP's actions against Dogan suggest a striking parallel to the Russian case. The new fine brings the total charges against Dogan to \$3.1 billion, an amount larger than Dogan's worth. Should Dogan meet Khodorkovsky's fate or approach it, the remainder of the country's rich, the safety valve of pro-Western Turkey, will be hard pressed not to take inspiration from Abramovich.

Meanwhile, Turkey's intellectuals worry about Ergenekon. When the case opened in 2007, AKP watchers saw it as an opportunity for Turkey to clean up corruption and investigate coup allegations, yet the case has become much more than that.

For starters, the case is nebulous. In a recent SAIS study, Gareth Jenkins, an Istanbul-based analyst, described Ergenekon as a case that charges people "with membership of an organization which, as defined in the indictment presented to the court, does not appear to exist or to ever have existed."

Instead of prosecuting criminals, the AKP is using this fluid case to persecute its opponents. Since 2007, AKP-controlled police have taken more than 150 people, including university presidents, journalists and women's activists, into custody without any evidence of criminal activity, only to release them after a few days of harsh questioning with no charges. Most have become docile intellectuals following their release. Meanwhile, some AKP opponents have been held in indefinite police custody for over a year, demonstrating to Turkey's intellectuals the cost of not supporting the AKP.

Wiretaps are another tool for the harassment of liberal and secular Turks. In Turkey, it is a crime to wiretap private conversations or publish conversations captured by the police. However, pro-AKP media outlets regularly publish wiretapped conversations of the AKP's opponents, compromising their private lives and even alleging that they are "terrorists" connected to Ergenekon. The AKP does not prosecute these crimes, which terrorize liberal intellectuals.

In truth, Ergenekon has devolved into a witch hunt, reminiscent of the McCarthy trials in the United States. Most Turks refuse to even discuss the case on the phone or via e-mail, out of fear that just by speaking of it they might be implicated in it.

This state of fear and intimidation in Turkey is nightmarish. However, things could still end up well. Whenever Turkey goes through a political spasm, analysts warn about the collapse of Turkey's democracy. Despite this, Turkey has survived numerous crises in the past thanks to the balancing power of its fourth pillar. With coup allegations, the arrest of the government's opponents and a media crackdown in the background, only a free and independent media can resolve things. Never before has media independence been so crucial to Turkish democracy.

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