

# Turkey's Media War

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Articles & Testimony

**F**or the last six years, the Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association, Tusiad, has been a crucial source of support for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). The pro-business, pro-European Union group provided the party with domestic and international legitimacy, and armed it with the means to fight off accusations that it was an Islamist party. But over the last several months the relationship between TUSIAD and the AKP, always an uneasy one, has faltered. AKP leader and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has sharply attacked Aydin Dogan -- whose family holds the presidency of the association and owns roughly half the Turkish media -- characterizing Dogan as a rich and corrupt businessman.

The proximate cause for the attacks: the Dogan group's ongoing coverage of a German court case that alleges that an AKP-appointed bureaucrat, whose job is to monitor the Turkish media, illegally transferred money collected by a German-based Turkish Islamist charity to Turkey, and used it for private gain and political activity. Erdogan characterized the charges as an effort to defame the AKP, responding with fury to the coverage of the case in the Dogan media, saying this constituted "media terror." He alleged that the Dogan-owned media covered the court case in retaliation for his refusal to grant Dogan a zoning permit to build a multibillion-dollar condo project in Istanbul. Dogan issued a rebuke to Erdogan, saying he will not acknowledge fealty to the AKP or the prime minister. And the battle of words continues. But the dispute is really a political matter -- yet another attempt by Erdogan and the AKP to neuter a bastion of opposition.

They have tried this strategy before, with enormous success. Last year, the secular opposition and the military attempted to block the AKP from electing its own presidential candidate, Abdullah Gul, and the AKP successfully challenged the claim, suggesting that the secular opposition did not want Gul because of his religious Muslim identity. The AKP thereby created a secular-vs.-Muslim divide, positioning itself on the winning Muslim side of this fault line. The populist strategy worked: the AKP won 47 percent of the vote in the 2007 parliamentary elections, defeating the opposition in a monumental victory and exposing the fact that hell does not freeze over when the Turkish military is ignored.

A walk around Istanbul's majority working- and lower-middle-class neighborhoods, known as varos, is a testimony to the AKP's grip on Turkish society and the weak nature of the opposition. The AKP is the only party organized in the varos overall, with complementary grass-roots and clientalist networks that distribute government material assistance to the inhabitants of these neighborhoods in return for votes for the AKP. Now with a weakened military and fractured opposition parties, Erdogan is squaring off against the only real opposition -- his former ally Dogan, the secular businesses and the media -- in an attempt to show that he is the boss. As Turkey prepares for nationwide local elections in early 2009, the AKP's demarche against Dogan is also an attempt to cast itself as the defender of the people against the "corrupt rich." This populist strategy of stoning the secular rich might pave the way for a colossal AKP victory in 2009. But the strategy comes at the expense of the party's earlier alliances. Will it work? Like many other peoples, Turks have a deep disdain toward billionaires. So Erdogan might be able to persuade Dogan to have his newspapers and TV networks drop the coverage of the German court case and stay away from criticizing the government. In this case, the Turkish media would continue to be free, but would cease to be independent. After all,

almost the entire non-Dogan half of the media is owned by pro-AKP businesses, and most of the remaining media outlets attempt to curry favor with the AKP by maintaining a pro-government slant.

A second possible outcome is that Dogan's media would continue to carry the news from Germany that implicates the AKP in an Islamist corruption scandal. Such news, even if it tarnishes the AKP's clean, non-Islamist image abroad, might pave the way for mutual corruption allegations between the AKP and Dogan, and might also result in court cases against Dogan. Perversely, this strategy could make the AKP even more popular in the 2009 elections than it was in 2007. It plays to the party's portrayal of itself as the underdog, and could push the secular businesses into aligning themselves with the AKP. In 2003, Vladimir Putin's heavy-handed treatment of his billionaire opponent Mikhail Khodorkovsky -- he sent the Russian businessman to jail on corruption charges -- taught other Russian billionaires a lesson, forcing them into exile or turning them into subservient figures like Roman Abramovich. Should Dogan meet Khodorkovsky's fate or even come close to it -- pro-AKP media have already hinted at corruption allegations against Dogan, suggesting, for instance, that his companies have been smuggling printing paper into Turkey -- Turkey's rich will be hard pressed not to take inspiration from Abramovich. That too, of course, would effectively spell the end for what remains of Turkey's secular opposition.

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