

Turkish government arrests media chiefs in latest assault on free speech in the media

Ekrem Dumannli, the chief editor of Zaman, Turkey's biggest selling newspaper, cries 'we are not scared' after he and other journalists are detained by police over terrorism allegations



scared," Mr Dumanli said as he was ushered away with the police. 'we are not scared'.

"The detentions have been ordered in order to take their testimonies on charges of founding and directing an armed terror organization, being a member of this organization, and engaging in forgery and slander," said a statement released by the Istanbul Chief Prosecutors office later that day. But the protesters believe this is merely another purge on the ever-shrinking media that is prepared to criticise the government.

Dumanli wasn't the only target. Around thirty-one people were detained, mostly other media chiefs, a TV scriptwriter, a TV show director, and a handful of former police chiefs who are suspected if having links to Hizmet, an organisation in confrontation with the AKP government.

Briefly, Hizmet is a popular and somewhat secretive movement founded by Fetullah Gulen, an elderly preacher in self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania. Gulen preaches a brand of Islam that many Turks find agreeable, emphasising use of modern technology, moderation, interfaith dialogue, and promoting Turkishness. The foundation operates schools and universities in over 140 countries and has other investments in health clinics, finance and media - including publications such as Zaman.

For ten years, Gulen's movement colluded with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's AKP government, proving particularly useful on the campaign trail. Gulen and Erdogan shared the same enemies and it seems that Gulenists in the police and judiciary may have assisted the AKP government by finding ways of putting political foes behind bars.

While the current government used to be happy enough to see their political enemies framed, they are now charging Gulenists in the police and judiciary with "these arrests are nothing to do with animosity between Gulen and Erdogan per se. Erdoğan goes after anybody who criticises him publically. He goes after journalists who criticise him, and has them sent to jail".

With an estimated forty journalists currently languishing behind bars, Turkey is the world's biggest jailer of journalists. According to Reporters without Borders, Turkey lies 154th out of 180 countries in terms of press freedom. To avoid jail, most media outlets self-censor, disciplining and firing media workers who are critical of the government.

To avoid these pitfalls, some Turks post anonymously using blogs and fake twitter accounts. Turkey's most celebrated media outlaw is probably 'Fuat Avni', who claims to have close connections to Erdogan's inner circle, and regularly tweets warnings about operations against the public. This account tipped off the public about this Sunday's arrests, with a list of all those due to be arrested, and even the police officers responsible with each arrest, which were originally due to take place with an element of surprise on Friday.

Fuat initially tweeted that around 140 journalists were to be detained, with 400 citizens to be arrested in total. By Sunday, this had been revised. "Operations against mainstream and liberal journalists will not take place - for now".

The timing of these arrests are interesting. A new law was put in place only on Friday making it easier to arrest and detain citizens. And it is almost exactly a year to the day when police - presumably Gulenists - went after Erdoğan and his cabinet with audio evidence of corruption. Then, as now, reaction was fierce and relentless, with prosecutors, police and journalists moved or fired by the thousands.

Furthermore, last December the government had been easily able to placate much of the public by claiming they had been victim of a 'montage' - claiming that the recordings had been faked, as part of a campaign of dirty tricks.

"Once again, President Erdoğan has shown he will embrace extreme measures to silence dissident voices. He believes in a compliant press, not a free press," said CPJ (Committee to Protect Journalists) spokesperson Simon Rowe on Sunday. Criticism of the government's position continues to come under fire from all corners. The lira slumped today as nervous investors pulled out their money.

Emma Sinclair-Webb, a senior Turkey researcher at Human Rights Watch, echoes Rowe's concerns. "The detention of journalists and editors in the context of this latest wider operation of arrests looks like another attempt to crack down on critical media," she said.

The EU also chimed in: "The police raids and arrests of a number of journalists and media representatives in Turkey today are incompatible with the freedom of media, which is a core principle of democracy," EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini and Enlargement Commissioner Johannes Hahn said in a joint statement.

Anybody who observes Erdoğan though, knows he can always be relied on to fight fire with fire. "The EU should mind its own business and keep its own opinions to itself," he declared.

Turkey's President cares little for what outsiders have to say, at least publically. He may occasionally back down, but very quietly. Openly, he battles hard and nonstop. His supporters enjoy this streetfighter image, and tend to believe his various accusations of foreign plots. The opposition remain weak, largely because there isn't much historical evidence that they would behave any better if they were in power. Meanwhile the economy is weakening but on a visible level the country continues to modernise on many levels. Erdoğan still seems invincible.

Ozgur Kuçuk remains defiant. "The original Fuat Avni twitter leak suggested that around 140 journalists would be arrested, including about half of the staff of Zaman newspaper". he asserted. "I wrote a book about the events of last December 17th



James Smart

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