

House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats

Turkey's Democratic Decline

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Chairman Rohrabacher, Ranking Member Meeks, and members of the subcommittee, it is an honor to testify before you today. I ask that my written testimony be admitted into the record.

There is no question that when it comes to issues of free speech, due process, and individual and civil rights, the situation in Turkey has deteriorated significantly in the last three years. The atmosphere created by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is not conducive to free discussion of ideas, policies, and politics. President Erdoğan has been in effect violating the Turkish Constitution by acting in a partisan way, interfering with all institutions of the state and society, from Parliament to parties to the press to municipalities and academia.

What makes this situation paradoxical is that in the beginning of AKP rule in the early 2000s, Erdoğan and his party were in the vanguard of an unprecedented liberalization of social and political space. A bureaucratic-military secular elite that derived a much support from an urban intelligentsia and business elite wedded to the ideas of Turkey's modern founder, Kemal Atatürk, had traditionally governed Turkey.

The AKP opened up the political space and allowed for previously banned or underrepresented voices to have their day in the sun. Still, the Turkish military remained as a powerful force behind the scenes, carefully monitoring AKP's actions always fearful that the party would pursue policies deemed too "Islamic." In 2007, in a critical strategic error, the military high command decided to block AKP stalwart and foreign minister Abdullah Gül's quest to run for the presidency. By throwing caution to

the wind, the military allowed the AKP to mount a counter attack. In national elections called by the AKP, where this was the preeminent issue, the electorate delivered a stinging rebuke to the military by reelecting the AKP with a much larger share of the vote.

The defeat of the military liberated the AKP from its only powerful nemesis. The impact of this development would not become evident for some time. The change really emerged after 2013; in his quest to outmaneuver the military and populate his administration with experienced cadres, Erdoğan had made an alliance with Fethullah Gülen, a religious leader with a substantial following and the *bête noire* of the military. Fearful of the military, Gülen had sought refuge in the United States. That alliance ended when tapes of conversations of the then Prime Minister Erdoğan and others were leaked to the media detailing extraordinary accounts of corruption at the highest levels of the government.

Erdoğan quickly went on the counterattack and began to dismantle the Gülen organization in the state bureaucracy and everywhere else—most importantly in the media. Even before this denouement, Erdoğan had already begun to create his own press establishment. Today, much of the press is controlled directly by surrogates of President Erdoğan or owned by people who are completely subordinate to him by virtue of financial and business deals. The pro-government press and websites are essentially used as tools to intimidate and attack opponents. What is left of the independent press is working under exceedingly difficult conditions with almost no advertising revenue and with limited access to institutions, such as Turkish Airlines that buys papers in bulk. Television stations are being pushed out of the satellite networks that are broadcast everywhere in the country. Many papers, including the Gülen-owned large circulation *Zaman*, have been taken over by the state.¹ Even websites are under danger of being blocked; some 104,904 websites have had access restricted as of April of this year. Social media is often the target of government controls such as shutdowns or slowdowns. At this rate, there will be no independent press to speak off. Even in the

¹ When *Zaman* was taken over its archives, some 27 years of materiel, were deleted, thereby robbing everyone, most importantly future researchers, of access to rich data.

days when the military exercised a great deal of control behind the scenes and the political class was quite subservient to the officers' preferences, there was a much livelier press. As a result, Freedom House downgraded Turkey's press status from *partly free* to *not free* in 2013. Today there are an estimated 34 journalists in jail with the most recent arrests only a week ago.²

Even the largest independent media group, the Doğan Group, has seen its wings clipped; tax evasion charges levied at the owners have had the effect of the Damocles's Sword. The newsgroup has lost staff—fired or forced to resign—as the group as a whole eschewed its role as custodian of the public good. It started with the 2016 Gezi protests when the Doğan owned CNN-Turk refused to cover the events in Taksim Square live, preferring instead to run a documentary on penguins. Most recently the group's news agency, DHA, simply stated what the government prosecutor alleged when it issued arrest warrants for three journalists working for a pro-Kurdish news agency, DIHA: it, too, claimed without any proof that the three journalists were members of the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers' Party.

The general atmosphere of intimidation has been expanded with the liberal use of libel laws against individuals. Since August 2014, some 1,845 criminal cases have been opened up for insulting the President. Although few such cases end up in the defendant going to jail, the government has relied on this tactic to harass the opposition and its allies and in the process intimidate them. Academia has not been immune from these kinds of pressures. As of June 2016, some 37 academics have fired from both public and private universities, most because they signed on to a petition criticizing the government. It is widely expected that the probe into the 1,000+ academics that signed the petition will continue to claim more and more victims as the police continues to question "suspects."

The origins of the change in Turkish domestic policy on democratic rights can be attributed to two different political developments and interests. The first has to do with

² European Federation of Journalists, <http://europeanjournalists.org/journalists-in-jail-europe/>

the return to armed conflict with the PKK after a hiatus of more than two years. The conflict has caused much destruction throughout the southeast as the PKK decided to take the fight to the cities; hundreds of civilians have been killed along with more than 500 members of the security services and an untold number of PKK fighters. To date, large sections of many cities are still under curfew despite the end of hostilities months ago as residents cannot return or even claim their property. A recent report by [Human Rights Watch vividly details the attempts by the Turkish state to block independent investigations into alleged mass abuses of civilians.](#)³

The ceasefire collapsed primarily because Erdoğan decided to scupper peace negotiations between his representatives and those of the imprisoned PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, over disagreements about the future of the Syrian Kurds where the PKK affiliate and U.S. ally, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), has emerged as a critical force. Erdoğan wanted Öcalan and the PKK to halt PYD's advances for fear that an emerging future Syrian Kurdish entity, led by a group allied if not created by the PKK, would strategically threaten Turkey in the long run. When the PKK refused to go along, Erdoğan refused to recognize the "Dolmabahçe" agreement his lieutenants had signed with the Kurdish side. By abandoning the process, he also sought to shore up support among hardliners in society and the military. Most ominous is his decision to give immunity to members of the armed forces fighting the PKK; in effect, they cannot be prosecuted for any violation of individual rights no matter how odious they may be.⁴

The other reason for the regime's hardening stance on freedom of expression has to do with both the Gülen challenge and the resulting corruption revelations and with the need to change the political system from a parliamentary to a presidential system. The corruption revelations and the 2013 mass Gezi protests demonstrated to Erdoğan that he was vulnerable. The vulnerability existed not just among the electorate but also with other institutions of the state, namely the judiciary. If anything, the June 2015 elections demonstrated how real that danger was as his party lost its majority in Parliament. Had

³ Human Rights Watch, "Turkey: State Blocks Probes of Southeast Killings," July 11, 2016.

⁴ Reuters, "Turkey grants immunity to security forces fighting militants," June 24, 2016.

it not been for his rapid maneuvering and the dysfunction within the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) that prevented the formation of an opposition governing coalition that allowed him to turn the tables on his opponents, Erdoğan would have found that his political powers—almost absolute now though not formal—could have been severely curtailed. Hence he singlehandedly forced a second election under heightened tensions and conflict with the PKK that returned the AKP to power.

Erdoğan has extended his control over just about every institution: having purged his original partners from 2002 and replaced them with weak politicians who have no significant base of their own, therefore deriving any legitimacy or power from proximity to him, he now completely controls his party. Similarly, other state institutions are in the process of being revamped to his benefit, these include the bureaucracy, intelligence, and police. The state's judicial system is being revamped. He has created a network of businessmen who are subservient to him; a virtuous cycle of sorts as the beneficiaries of state contracts then enrich the coffers of the ruling party. Academia is also in the process of being transformed either by dismissals or the appointment of university presidents in opposition to faculty-wide election results.

Future Prospects

The prospects are dim. Erdoğan will change policies only when he deems them to be counterproductive as was the case with the negotiations with the PKK or the recent U-turns in foreign policy with Israel, Russia, and potentially with Egypt and even Syria and Iraq. Turkey has become a one-person state. In short, therefore, it is quite possible for him to alter policy but the cost and benefit calculations would have to have changed to force him to do so.