



Erdoğan vs. the Free Press

by Burak Bekdil

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The takeover of Turkey’s largest independent media group by an Erdoğan crony was not unexpected given the troubles and systematic state harassment suffered by the Dogan Media Company over the past decade. After the takeover, the opposition media will be limited to one large-circulation daily, a couple of small, left-wing newspapers, and a number of small digital platforms, with the third group now facing new pressure from the government.

First the good news: Turkey, which is already the worst jailer of journalists in the world, may no longer need to put newsmen and -women behind bars. The bad news, however, is that there may no longer be any journalists left with sufficient editorial liberty to anger Turkey’s Islamist strongman, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. This is because what most viewed as the last bastion of critical journalism in the mainstream press has been sold to a pro-Erdoğan businessman.

In an \$890 million deal, media tycoon and businessman Aydın Doğan, owner of the Doğan Media Company (DMC), sold all the company’s media assets to businessman Erdoğan Demirören, whose primary interests are energy, construction, tourism, and media.

DMC owned *Hürriyet*, Turkey’s most influential daily; the mass-circulation *Posta*; and the main entertainment and news channels Kanal D and CNN Türk; as well as Yaysat, the country’s biggest print press distribution network.

The new boss does not have an impressive profile as far as the free press is concerned. In a leaked telephone conversation in 2014, Demirören was heard apologizing to Erdoğan for an article in *Milliyet* newspaper – which he had earlier bought from Doğan. “Did I upset you, boss?” Demirören asked

Erdoğan, weeping and promising the then prime minister that he would find the source of the article in question.

The Doğan-Demirören deal was a source of lamentation for the handful of independent journalists remaining in the country and joy for pro-Erdoğan media workers. “The process of gathering the Turkish media industry in one hand according to the Putin model is completed,” wrote Kadri Gürsel, a veteran journalist. But Cem Küçük, a fiercely pro-government commentator, congratulated Doğan on Twitter. Küçük wrote that DMC journalists loyal to Erdoğan could feel “at ease.”

This was not a good day for a country that ranked 155th in the World Press Freedom Index of Reporters Without Borders. But none of this should come as a surprise to anyone familiar with the dynamics of the Islamist polity. The Doğan-Demirören deal has a decade-long history behind it.

In the mid-1990s, when Turkey was not yet an EU candidate, a Turkish daily ran a series of news reports detailing a web of relationships among politicians, mafia figures, and businessmen. The series alleged, with evidence, that a \$600 million bank privatization had been rigged in favor of a business crony of then Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz. It also alleged that the mafia had scared off other bidders during the tender process.

In the aftermath of the news campaign – which would not have been possible in the EU candidate Turkey of two decades later – the government collapsed and Yılmaz was tried at the Supreme Court on charges of corruption. Although the charges were later dropped on technical grounds, a little bit of investigative journalism had unseated the prime minister, substantially pruned the votes of the mainstream parties, and, ironically enough, paved the way for the election victory of Erdoğan in November 2002. Erdoğan promised reform, broader civil liberties, and a better democracy.

Erdoğan consolidated power in the mid-2000s and rediscovered his Islamist self toward the end of the decade.

In a public speech in 2008 he threatened DMC thus: “We will speak the language that you understand.” Erdoğan had devoted a good half an hour of his parliamentary speech to threatening “that media group [DMC]” which, he claimed, was covering the then public controversy around the Islamic headscarf in a “wicked way.”

That speech prompted this author, a columnist in the *Hürriyet* group at the time, to write a sarcastic piece, “*Hürriyet* ['freedom' in Turkish] must be banned for better democracy,” in September 2008.

“In Mr. Erdoğan's ideal democracy *Hürriyet* ['freedom'] should be banned. So should the opposition parties, opposition NGOs and all other groupings that oppose Mr. Erdoğan's Muslim democracy. Anyone who threatens the 'pyramid scheme' these 'good Muslims' have built should be sent to jail – all for better democracy.

“Unfortunately, Mr. Erdoğan has zero tolerance for any criticism or opposition to his political empire. He gets easily annoyed not because his comrades are crooks but because someone verifies and the other publishes that they are crooks.”

In another “light” column this author warned his employers at Doğan against “corporate consequences”:

“The [Islamic headscarf] must be allowed not only in universities, but also in kindergarten too; actually [it] must be made a must-wear in government offices... the constitutional amendments to liberalize [it] are perfect examples that Turkey deserves full membership in the EU, since they make Turkey a perfect democracy... Long live Homo Islamicus Democraticus!”

And a word of caution to Doğan: “This columnist’s humble advice to *Hürriyet*’s publishers: Be wise, just do as I do and escape the corporate consequences.”

Sadly, they did not take this advice. In 2009, the company was fined \$2.5 billion for unpaid taxes, a figure that was bigger than DMC’s market value at the time. That was probably the “language” Erdoğan was referring to that Doğan would understand.

In the same year, in an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, Erdoğan played the Turkish reincarnation of Eliot Ness, the FBI agent who finished off gangster Al Capone. He told the WSJ: “In the US too there are people who have had problems with evading taxes. Al Capone comes to mind. He was very rich, but then he spent the rest of his life in jail. Nobody raised a voice when those events happened.”

With that Erdoğan was likening a media tycoon he deeply (and ideologically) disliked to Al Capone -- though Doğan, far from being a notorious mob leader, did not have any criminal record or charges. By using the Capone analogy, Erdoğan was confessing that while the problem with Doğan was something other than taxation, taxation was the only way to hit him.

While all this was happening, a company run by Erdoğan’s son-in-law appeared as the sole bidder for the Sabah group, Turkey’s second-biggest media outlet. Two state banks financed the takeover with loans at terms never

made public. Erdoğan, meanwhile, kept calling on his loyalists to boycott DMC outlets. Under pressure, a few of the most staunchly anti-Erdoğan columnists at *Hürriyet* had to resign. Ertuğrul Özkök, a well-known secularist, stepped down as *Hürriyet's* editor-in-chief but was given a column. Finally, Aydın Doğan, DMC's owner, quit as the company's president and a new generation of Doğans took over the management.

After the Doğan takeover the opposition will be limited to one large-circulation daily, *Sözcü*; a couple of small, left-wing newspapers; and a number of small digital platforms, with the third group facing new pressure from the government.

Following the Russian way, Erdoğan's government is now drafting a bill to broaden the powers of the already aggressive radio and television censor to include the Internet. The plan is to control what 80 million Turks are allowed to see on their computers or television screens. Turkey, which has on occasion banned or blocked access to Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, as well as virtual private network services (VPNs), has also blocked Wikipedia in all languages. The opposition says the vague wording in the new legislation could mean that individuals, currently exempt from oversight, may now be targets for posting critical material on the web without a license.

The demise of Turkish democracy under Islamist rule has been slow but steady. It's time to gear up.

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