

International delegation draws attention to Turkey's press freedom record

Author:

Thu, 2020-10-15 21:21

ANKARA: Restrictions on Turkey's press freedom have been put in the spotlight by a four-day visit to Turkey by a group of 11 international press freedom, journalism and human rights groups.

Based on its meetings with Turkish journalists, civil society members, parliamentarians, judiciary members and diplomatic missions, the delegation released its initial findings on Oct. 14, with a special emphasis on the increasing state control over the media, lack of independence of regulatory bodies and the restrictions of the new social media law on the freedom of expression.

The persistent investigations and imprisonment of independent journalists and the attacks that compromise the safety of media representatives were also voiced by the mission as a source of concern.

The delegation was convened by the International Press Institute (IPI) and involved representatives from Article 19, the Association of European Journalists (AEJ), the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF), the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), Human Rights Watch (HRW), Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBC Transeuropa), PEN International, Reporters without Borders (RSF) and the South East Europe Media Organisation (SEEMO).

Turkey is ranked 154th out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' 2020 World Press Freedom Index that assesses the level of freedom available to journalists.

In September, at least 64 journalists appeared in Turkish courts for 38 press trials.

According to the data of Press In Arrest, an independent database about journalists' trials, Turkish journalists faced a 7 counts of aggravated life sentence, and prison sentences of up to a total of 970 years and 10 months in September. Journalists mainly faced charges of terrorism and espionage, and of insulting state officials.

The government excluded journalists from an early release program to ease overcrowding in prisons during the pandemic, even though some of them faced grave health risks.

"We can clearly conclude that the censorship and press freedom crisis in Turkey is worsening," Scott Griffen, deputy director at IPI, told Arab News.

"On the one hand, journalists are still being jailed for doing their job and the justice system is being instrumentalized to crack down on critics. We don't see any political will from the authorities to change this. But on the other hand, new issues are emerging: State capture of the media, digital censorship and new attacks on judicial independence," he added.

Griffen underlined that after the mainstream media were captured by the state, social media and online platforms became havens of free expression beyond the government's censorship tools.

The new social media law that came into force on Oct. 1, obliges online platforms such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook with more than a million users to send reports to Turkey's state-controlled Information and Communication Technologies Authority about requests to censor or block access to online content.

The law sparked concern among rights groups about its potential use to censor outspoken journalists in the country who use online platforms as a small window through which they try to continue their journalism.

With the new law, internet hosts or search engines have immediately to execute access blocking decisions of the authorities, while the social media companies are required to appoint a representative in Turkey and store users' data on local servers, a move that gives the government more chance to silence fierce criticism and block access to websites such as Twitter that Turkish people use for following news that is not controlled by the government.

"Turkey's social media law threatens to usher in a new era of digital censorship. We also see the increasing use of regulatory bodies, such as the Radio and Television High Council (RTUK), which are supposed to be independent but are instead instrumentalized by the state, to punish critical broadcast and online media in particular," Griffen said.

The international delegation also drew attention to the rising pressure on the judiciary, especially on the Turkish Constitutional Court, which is the last remaining bastion for defending press freedom on the basis of the constitution.

The top court has been subject to harsh criticism by the government officials who have called for a reorganization of the institution to fit into the executive presidential system that will inevitably curb its independent status.

According to Griffen, if the court is lost to pressure, it will be a huge blow to democracy and the rule of law in Turkey.

The international mission also met with the Human Rights Department of the Ministry of Justice during their visit to Ankara.

However, Griffen said, the mission members did not see any political will from the governmental authorities to reverse the damage that the press freedom crackdown has caused to democracy in Turkey.

“We do not yet see the will to end the relentless attacks on individual journalists and their families or to end political influence over the judiciary and bring Turkey back to the club of countries that respect the rule of law,” he added.

An Istanbul court on Oct. 7 declared exiled dissident journalist Can Dunder, the former editor of Cumhuriyet newspaper, a “fugitive” and ruled for the seizure of his assets. Dunder fled to Germany almost four years ago. He was charged with supporting a terrorist group.



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Turkey ‘using virus curbs to target media’ Broadcasting bans on critical Turkish outlets rise amid free press concerns

[Turkish court and ministry spar over lighting tweet](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-10-15 01:32

ANKARA: A dispute between Turkish state apparatus heated up on Tuesday night after a Twitter spat about who worked harder at night.

The fresh debate was triggered after a tweet from a Constitutional Court member, Engin Yildirim, who shared a photograph of the building and said: "The lights are on."

The tweet quickly came to the attention of pro-government media and government authorities, who accused the judge of "implying a coup attempt," a reference to a failed putsch from July 2016.

Not to be outdone, the Ministry of Interior tweeted a photograph of its building with the caption: "Our lights never go off."

"Those who assumed the duty of those who greeted putschists in the past by saying 'the lights of the General Staff are on' should not wait even for a second to resign!" the deputy interior minister tweeted, suggesting that journalists had always previously checked the General Staff building's lights at night for signs that a coup was being prepared.

The judge later deleted his tweet.

The Constitutional Court held an unscheduled meeting on Wednesday, releasing a statement afterwards saying that it opposed all kinds of anti-democratic interventions that undermined constitutional order.

Berk Esen, a political scientist from Sabanci University in Istanbul, said the row between the court and the ministry was worrying and that he was concerned about the possible negative ramifications in the weeks ahead.

"For many, the lights don't matter if justice and the rule of law are already under darkness for a longtime," he told Arab News. "The decisions of Turkey's top court were long annoying the government and its nationalistic alliance partner which was even urging for reshaping the court 'in line with the presidential system.'"

A series of Constitutional Court actions have upset the ministry which, in turn, has pushed back and tried to cut the institution down to size.

Esen said that if the top court's decisions were no longer recognized, there would be no legal body left to stop an arbitrary interpretation of Turkey's constitution.

"In the past, the Constitutional Court did not take the necessary steps to prevent autocratization in the country and ratified many articles that undermined the democratic regime, including some presidential decrees.

It failed to serve as a check on the presidency's growing control over the political system, so they share some blame for Turkey's democratic backsliding," he added.



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[EU, Russia in double threat to Erdogan](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-10-15 01:06

ANKARA, BRUSSELS: Recep Tayyip Erdogan faced isolation on two fronts on Wednesday as European and Russian diplomats moved to rein in the Turkish president's adventurism in the eastern Mediterranean and the Caucasus. EU officials admitted their strategy to defuse tensions with Turkey was unraveling only two weeks after it began. Despite an EU summit deal in the early hours of Oct. 2 aimed at persuading Ankara to stop exploring for natural gas in Greek and Cypriot territorial waters, Turkey has redeployed a survey vessel with an armed escort.

Three European diplomats said this gave the impression that Ankara was toying with Brussels.

EU leaders had failed to come up with a solution to the gas dispute, instead proposing a "carrot-and-stick" approach – offering benefits but also

threatening sanctions – that had failed, the diplomats said.

“EU leaders kicked the can down the road by saying they would come back to the issue in December. Now it is coming back with a vengeance,” one diplomat said.

Greece and Cyprus will raise the gas dispute again when EU leaders meet on Thursday and Friday, arguing that the latest escalation has demonstrated the need for more urgent action, including sanctions. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas canceled a trip to Ankara in protest at the deployment of the Turkish exploration ship Oruc Reis.

HIGHLIGHT

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Meanwhile, Russia downgraded its relationship with Turkey on Wednesday amid growing concern in Moscow over Ankara’s role in the conflict in Nagorny-Karabakh.

“Russia has never considered Turkey as its strategic ally, only a partner,” Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said. He also warned that Turkey’s involvement in the conflict should be transparent.

“We disagree with the position which has been voiced by Turkey and which has also been expressed by Azerbaijan’s president,” Lavrov said. “We cannot agree ... that a military solution to the conflict is possible and admissible.”

Richard Giragosian, director of the Regional Studies Center in Yerevan, said Moscow was responding to Erdogan’s assertion of power in the South Caucasus, which Moscow saw as part of its sphere of influence.

“Lavrov’s statement ... is a direct message and warning to Turkey, driven by a responsive Russian posture to push back and push out Turkey from encroaching in the region and challenging Russian interests,” he said.

“Apart from Azerbaijan’s decision to deceive Moscow by rejecting the cease-fire, Turkey’s determination to defy the Kremlin poses a real obstacle to regional security.”



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'Disruptor' Erdogan faces sanctions over new oil mission in eastern Med
Seizure of ancient seed collection in Turkey sign of 'hyper-nationalist' atmosphere under Erdogan

[Jordanian boy suffers horrific injuries in revenge attack](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-10-15 01:14

AMMAN: A 16-year-old Jordanian boy has lost both of his hands and an eye in a revenge attack by a criminal gang that targeted his father in the industrial city of Zarqa in Jordan.

A video of the victim has gone viral, causing public outrage. King Abdullah II has taken a personal interest in the case and requested that the boy be treated at the King Hussein Medical Center. He also called on police to pursue the perpetrators.

Queen Rania has also tweeted about the case. "How do we replace for you what the criminals took away? How do we reunite your mother's heart and those of your family? How do we protect our children from those who are not being deterred? This is a heinous crime. Our hearts are with you. I add my voice for the perpetrators facing the most severe punishment," she said.

Amer Sartawi, spokesman of the Jordanian police, told Arab News that the attacker and five members of his gang were apprehended and will be tried in the state security court. "A special unit worked on the case and was able to arrest the lead attacker and five of his cohorts. Two pieces of weapons and sharp objects that were used in the crime were confiscated. Further investigation will determine if there are other accomplices," he said.

Mahmoud Zawahreh, director of Naya Community Center in Zarqa, told Arab News that the filming and distribution of the video was as ugly as the crime itself. "This crime reflects a moral low of humanity and a sign of the increase of the culture of violence in recent years in our society."

Zawahreh, a youth activist, said that while financial losses can be replenished, moral losses will be long-lasting. "We are suffering from a moral loss that will not be easily replaced. We need to have a thorough study of how to deter such morally reprehensible crimes in the future."

Jordan's police force also arrested a person charged with filming and distributing the video of the victim's injuries.

He is being held in violation of Article 11 of the Cybercrime law, which prohibits violating the privacy of children.

Taghrid Doghmi, director of the Wae'e Center for Human Rights Training, told Arab News that the usual punishment in civil courts for kidnapping and causing permanent harm is a 10 year prison sentence. Public anger expressed on social media has led to calls for capital punishment and life imprisonment for the attackers.

Sartawi said that the state security court will charge the accused with terrorizing the public. He added that, if convicted, the penalty for the charged crimes will be a lifetime in jail for the perpetrators. The lead criminal has 172 prior convictions, police said.

Doghmi supported the arrest of the person who took the video, saying that the distribution of the clip is a clear crime according to Jordanian law. "Even if the victim or his family agreed to the filming, this is still a crime because of the age of the victim."

Muath Momani, director of Lawyers Without Borders, told Arab News that the entire penal code must be revised. "We must think long and hard about how to deal with cases like this with a mix of direct incarceration and social rehabilitation taken into consideration, to ensure that such crimes are not repeated."



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Jordan's King Abdullah swears in new government to speed reforms
Jordan to unveil over 100 testing sites in heightened COVID-19 efforts

[Yemen separatist council urged to honor military commitments under Riyadh Agreement](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-10-15 01:09

AL-MUKALLA: The Yemeni government has urged the pro-independence Southern Transitional Council (STC) to immediately put into place security and military arrangements approved under the Riyadh Agreement to help smooth the way toward forming a new administration.

Ahmed Obeid Bin Daghr, a senior adviser to the Yemeni president and himself a former president of the country, said on Tuesday that the internationally recognized government had honored its political commitments under the

agreement by naming a new governor and security chief for Aden.

But he signaled that the new government could not be named until the STC had implemented its security and military commitments, such as withdrawing forces from Aden and Abyan.

"We hope that military measures will follow in Abyan and security in Aden to ensure the return of the president, parliament, and the government to the temporary capital of Aden," Bin Daghr said in a tweet, pointing out the significance of the Riyadh Agreement in bringing together Yemenis in their mutual battle against the Iran-backed Houthis.

The Yemeni official thanked Saudi Arabia for bridging differences between the two groups and helping them overcome difficulties in the implementation process of the agreement.

In Aden, STC leaders had previously denied repeated government accusations that they were delaying withdrawals, claiming that some government military units involved in fighting in Abyan had not returned to their bases in the central city of Marib.

During a meeting on Saturday with the Saudi military committee monitoring the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement in Aden, Ahmed Saeed bin Breik, the STC's acting president, said the council had submitted proposals for accelerating the fulfilment of the Riyadh Agreement, disengagement of forces, and repositioning troops.

At the same meeting, Ahmed Lamli, Aden's new governor and the STC's secretary-general, said that he had ordered the removal of military and security checkpoints from streets in Aden and was working on restoring vital services.

Under the Riyadh Agreement, designed to defuse tensions between the government and STC in southern Yemen, the council will be included in a new government in exchange for pulling out of Aden and Abyan and allowing the government to return to Aden.

Fighting between the two sides broke out in May when government forces pushed toward Aden in a move aimed at expelling separatists from the strategic city.

In June, the Saudi-led coalition deployed military officers to monitor a truce in Abyan and the withdrawal of arms and weapons from Aden.

Meanwhile, fighting raged on Wednesday in different areas of the western city of Hodeidah where the Iran-backed Houthis have been pushing to drive government forces out of liberated parts of the city and the districts of Hays and Al-Durihimi.

The Joint Forces, an umbrella term for three major military units in the country's western coast, said dozens of Houthis, including three field military leaders, were killed in fierce clashes on Tuesday and Wednesday and government forces had foiled Houthi attempts to advance in the province. In southern Taiz, official news agency SABA reported on Tuesday that government

troops had made limited gains in the city.



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Yemeni government, STC discuss coalition under Riyadh Agreement