

WHO'S WHO OF THE TURKISH PRESS

Posted on November 15, 2014 by Keghart



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Adam McConnel, [Serbestiyet](#), 27 October 2014



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Unfortunately for those of you experiencing angst over Turkish journalism's plight, the reality is that an objective, professional, and trustable Turkish press does not exist. That's right; the idea of an objective Turkish press is a myth, a fantasy, and in the realm of unicorns and leprechauns.

Sorry to disappoint you though: the absence of an objective Turkish press has little to do with any "oppression" coming from the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government. True enough, Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan has apparently put pressure on some newspapers or journalists, and gotten some people fired, which was obviously not the right thing to do. But how does that

justify claims of "creeping dictatorship"?

In fact, the Turkish press is not under threat from the government, and is not censored. Just the opposite: the Turkish press is a daily anarchic knock-down, drag-out free-for-all. Literally. There are dozens of Turkish dailies, both national and local, and more than 200 TV channels. There are no apparent ethical or professional standards. Stories are created to suit the political tastes of the backers for any particular press outlet. If no sufficient rumors or stories exist, they are created, and in order to damage whoever the perceived enemies are. Nearly everyone owes allegiance (and their jobs) to someone. The journalistic unions are a joke, compromised by either ties to the state/military or to rigid leftist ideology. One prominent Turkish journalists' group, the *Gazeteciler ve Yazarlar Vakfı* (the Journalists' and Writers' Foundation, sponsors of the Abant Platform) is directly linked to Fethullah Gülen. For decades, the "secular" newspapers have featured scantily clad women on their back page. And every newspaper, TV channel, and (almost all – there are a few exceptions) media figure can be neatly identified as either pro- or anti-AKP.

Otherwise put, the situation in the Turkish press is a complete and utter disaster, a wasteland. The Turkish press has never been purely a source of information. Rather, Turkish newspapers and TV stations have always been about propaganda, and spreading a certain political perspective. This problem goes back to the early decades of the Turkish Republic, when opposition newspapers were not tolerated, and newspapers were expected to educate the Turkish people about the nation's path towards Civilization or Modernity. Consequently, Turkish people now generally view their news sources as entertainment or as information which soothes their cognitive dissonance.

Even better, international news services pick up "stuff" from the Turkish press and then relay it to their editors and readers as news. Often it's nothing of the sort, and is simply someone's (usually) anti-AKP rant.

The reason for the anti-AKP nature of "stuff" emerging from the Turkish press has to do with class issues in Turkish society. The vast majority of Turkish elites are blinkered and stridently anti-AKP. However, because they are the elites, they have access to a private education that endows them with some proficiency in foreign languages. Consequently, Turkish elites comprise the great majority of Turkish people who study abroad or cultivate foreign contacts. That makes them the go-to people for the foreign news services who are trying to figure out just what the heck is going on in the country. But their class-based bias against the governing party, and especially against Tayyip Erdoğan, guarantees that news coming from them casts Erdoğan, the AKP, and anything at all connected to the AKP's policies (economy, environment, human rights, etc.) in the worst light possible.

Thus overseas readers have been expecting — for what, twelve years? — that Turkey will become an Islamo-fascist murderous totalitarian super-dictatorship just like Iran, ISIS, and Hitler all put together... any minute now!!!

I'm hoping none of them were holding their breath.

The Turkish press features no publication that even remotely approaches the writing and reporting standards of major publications in the US, the UK, or other industrialized countries. So, as a public service for editors at the *NYT*, the *Washington Post*, the *Guardian*, the *Financial Times*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *El País*, *Le Monde*, and many others, let me spell out the allegiances of the papers mostly commonly seen on Istanbul's streets:

Agos: Istanbul's Armenian daily, lately has tilted anti-AKP.

Akşam: owned by perpetually impecunious Çukurova Holding head Mehmet Emin Karam Mehmet until 2013, when the Turkish state appropriated *Akşam* as a partial pay-off for some of Karam Mehmet's debts; the resulting shuffle at *Akşam* has resulted in a center-right, pro-AKP paper.

Aydınlık: the publication of Doğu Perinçek's Maoist left-splinter group, "nationalist-left" (a contradiction in terms, but just try to tell them that), strongly anti-AKP.

BirGün: the Romantic left, anti-AKP.

Bugün: religious, political right, connected to Fethullah Gülen, now anti-AKP.

CNN Türk: belongs to the Doğan Group, seemingly centrist but more anti-AKP than anything else (not a newspaper, but the website acts as a virtual newspaper accompanied by lots of fluff from social media).

Cumhuriyet: the flagship publication of the Kemalist elites, who often imagine themselves to be leftists, but in reality they are leftists of the sort that Mussolini was; virulently anti-AKP.

Dünya: political center, focused on economy and finance, is the closest thing that Turkey has to a politically neutral newspaper (but does publish a lightly anti-AKP article from time-to-time).

Güneş: tabloid, now in pro-AKP hands.

HaberTürk: another of the "Kemalist-left" papers, anti-AKP but recently trying to appear more neutral.

Hürriyet: the political middle, Doğan Group, anti-AKP, and has an English version, *Hürriyet Daily News*, famous for its poor grammar.

Milat: the political right, populist, obviously pro-AKP from its banner slogan "New Turkey's Future."

Milliyet: owned by the Doğan Group until 2011, now owned by the Demirören family, political center, but with a strong anti-AKP strand.

Posta: Doğan Group, tabloid.

Radikal: political left, dilettante intellectual, Doğan Group, but recently surviving only in an on-line edition, anti-AKP.

Sabah: political center, strongly pro-AKP, and has a not very prestigious English version called **Daily Sabah**.

Sol: political left, appealing to a marginal intelligentsia, anti-AKP.

Sözcü: a more fervent and populist version of **Cumhuriyet...** which of course moves them even closer to Mussolini; frenetically anti-AKP.

Star: formerly the possession of the Uzan family, that infamous collection of fraudsters, but after being taken over by the state has become political center-right and staunchly pro-AKP.

Takvim: political right, religious, strongly pro-AKP.

Taraf: the most recent infamous event in the Turkish newspaper biz was the rise of *Taraf* in 2007-2008 as a liberal-left alternative that openly discussed Kurdish issues, until it was taken over by Fethullah Gülen's people, which caused most of the original staff and writers to exit. It is now a stridently anti-AKP paper.

Türkiye: political center-right, pro-AKP.

Vatan: essentially a tabloid, plus one well-known anti-AKP writer.

Yeni Akit: very religious, political right, pro-AKP.

Yeni Asya: political right, religious, close to Fethullah Gülen's people (obvious from a picture of Said Nursi that greeted me when I looked at the website), anti-AKP.

Yeni Şafak: religious and historically known more for conspiracy theories and banal anti-Semitism, far right, vehemently pro-AKP.

Yurt: political center-right, Kemalist, anti-AKP.

Zaman: Fethullah Gülen's flagship paper, thus religious and on the political right, previously pro-AKP but now venomously anti-AKP, and has a long-running English version called *Today's Zaman*, which has been a primary source for a lot of the foreign press's anti-AKP reporting.

What is the main point? Of the 28 papers (or web sites) above, only the 2 tabloids and *Dünya* do not have a strong political stance. Of the remaining 25 papers, only eight are identifiable as pro-AKP. Now, one who has followed recent Turkish election results closely might be a bit surprised by this. After all, a party which receives nearly 50% of the national vote (as in 2011), and nearly 45% of the nationwide vote even in local elections (as in 2014), and whose leader was just elected President with 52% of the vote in a three-candidate race, might logically be expected to have more press outlets expressing its viewpoint. But the reality is that opposition press publications are far more numerous – and with an even bigger circulation overall.

Furthermore, three of the seven pro-AKP papers mentioned above — *Akşam*, *Sabah*, and *Star* — were essentially anti-AKP until their previous owners' financial malfeasance gave the government an excuse to appropriate them and turn them into pro-AKP outlets. Two of the current anti-AKP papers, *Bugün* and *Zaman*, were previously pro-AKP, but changed their stance late last year after the AKP government announced that the Turkish cram-school sector would be closed down as a part of ongoing efforts at educational reform. That move struck at the heart of Fethullah Gülen's financial resources, and consequently his publications did a rapid about-turn to become anti-AKP. Finally, the list above is not exhaustive; there are dozens more papers nationwide that are regional, and all have a specific political stance.

There is a small number of people writing columns that cannot be connected to the political stance of the paper they write for. Some are academics such as Cemil Koçak, a Sabancı University History

professor who writes a column on historical topics for *Star*, and Hasan Bülent Kahraman, who has written on various intellectual and socio-political topics for *Sabah* since long before it was taken over by the government. Others are writers who maintain a staunchly democratic, liberal, and even left-of-center perspective; because no Turkish newspaper embraces that perspective, they write for whichever paper will give them a spot on their writing staff. Writers such as Markar Esayan and Etyen Mahçupyan are in this group.

There are several other phenomena of which foreign observers of the Turkish press should be aware. One long-established, and amusing, trend is an increasing emphasis on fear-mongering related to the AKP government. I've begun to refer to this tendency as the "Young Officers Are Restless" theme, which needs some explanation. On 23 May 2003, one of the newspapers mentioned above, *Cumhuriyet*, ran a column by Mustafa Balbay with a title intended both as a reminder and as a threat to the AKP government and the then-PM, Tayyip Erdoğan. In Turkish, the headline was "Genç Subaylar Tedirgin" ("The Young Officers Are Restless"), an explicit reference to the 1960 Turkish military coup, which was carried out by the younger generation of Turkish military officers, and which resulted in the execution of the then-Prime Minister Adnan Menderes along with two other top-level government officials. The message was clear: if the AKP continues like this, yet another coup is in the offing.

The opposition press has, in the intervening years, greatly developed the technique of fear-mongering in hopes of creating social antipathy towards the AKP government. There has always been talk of "takiyye" (dissimulation) and "creeping Islamism," but in the past year other themes have come to the fore. My personal favorite has been the recurrent emphasis on how Istanbul, and the country at large, is on the verge of losing its drinking water supply to drought. This topic, in reality a serious issue, has been blighted by attempts to whip up anti-AKP sentiment. Since December and the abortive attempt to bring down the AKP government through corruption allegations, *Zaman* has nurtured a constant stream of stories insinuating that Istanbul is about to run out of water, that the government has been caught napping and is not acting to address the problem, and that the country is doomed to no water in the very, very, VERY near future. These articles have been accompanied by pictures of bone-dry reservoirs and a vocabulary intended to induce desert imagery. This campaign, also embraced by other opposition publications, reached such a hysterical tenor that, every time it rained in the lead-up to the March 2014 local elections, there was palpable disappointment in the opposition press. The articles in question would recede for several days (along with rising water levels in Istanbul's reservoirs) until enough sunny days brought the fretting back to the surface, at which point the hysteria would increase in intensity until the next rainfall. Detailed, data-filled announcements from government officials about exactly where Istanbul's water was coming from, how much water the city had access to, or to the effect that the dry reservoirs in the pictures were actually overflow reservoirs that dry up anyway made no difference to those intent on creating fear and tension.

What is striking about all of this is that this focus on Istanbul's water supplies has absolutely nothing to do with environmentalism or concerns about global warming. People have long been worrying about what global warming may do to Turkey's water supplies, especially parts of central Anatolia which already receive rainfall that is barely enough for an annual grain crop. Additionally, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers have their sources in the Anatolian mountains, and rainfall problems in Anatolia will mean problems downstream (in addition to all other difficulties that are already present). The opposition press's focus on Istanbul's water supplies is entirely newfound and political, and they engage with this topic solely as a means to attack the AKP government. It is so ludicrous as to make me refer to this trend as the "Young Dams Are Restless" ("Genç Barajlar Tedirgin") theme. This will have repercussions for those who, in the coming years and decades, will be forced to deal with the issue of Turkey's water resources in a serious and non-political manner.

There are other such trends and topics "discovered" by the opposition press over the past year as they have begun to grasp at any straw to attack the AKP government. *Zaman*, for example, has become a staunch defender of the environment only since last November-December, when their final fall-out with the AKP government occurred and they began to search for nails to hammer at. Now *Zaman* echoes the superficial environmentalism of other opposition publications, and attacks the AKP's infrastructure projects on those terms. This has reached the point where *Zaman*, an enemy of the opposition press until November 2013, now echoes the scare coverage and headlines of the pro-Kemalist opposition press. Another field is labor rights, previously a topic addressed only by the most leftist of Turkish publications (because most opposition publications come from and cater to the Turkish elites, labor issues have never occupied much space in their pages). Now, however, all opposition publications jump on the protest bandwagon when a mine disaster happens, or when workers at construction sites die in accidents. This is nauseating hypocrisy.

Still other themes intended to elicit distrust for the AKP have been around for years. Another favorite of mine is the Great Turkish Real Estate Bubble, the imminent bursting of which has been predicted breathlessly for more than six years by both domestic and foreign pundits. There may very well be a Turkish real estate bubble, but telling everyone for six years that the sky is falling, as the sector with the supposed bubble continues to grow and expand, eventually wears out one's credibility. Or at least it should. Another is the Coming Ban on Alcohol, initiated a nanosecond after the AKP was elected to power in 2002. This theme has particular puissance amongst the Turkish elites, and is effective in promoting conjunctural hysteria. In the past twelve years the only developments related to alcohol are that its taxation has increased (Americans know what "sin taxes" are), and it is now more effectively regulated, which has meant a drastic drop in the number of deaths/injuries from drinking moonshine packaged as legitimate booze. My suggested antidote is to take a stroll down İstiklal Street on a Friday night, and then ask yourself whether alcohol seems to be in danger of elimination from Turkish night life.

One other Turkish press phenomenon that shouldn't be overlooked, because of its influence

amongst elite or middle-class Turkish youth of high school or university age is the art-satire 'zine sector. There is a long Turkish tradition of hand-drawn satire 'zines that, in addition to large doses of (juvenile male) obscenity and sex, are overtly political and leftist. 'Zines like *Penguen*, *Leman*, *Uykusuz*, *Girgir*, and others (there's even one aimed specifically at women, called *Bayan Yani*) have been an outlet for the young radical left for several decades. For the past ten years have been ferociously anti-AKP, to the point where then-PM Tayyip Erdoğan took several of such 'zines to court for defamation and slander. Even though (or maybe because) the intellectual level of these 'zines hovers around the erogenous zones, they are widely read and loved by the liberal youth, and can be spotted in their hands every day on the subway and public buses.

Thus, the Turkish press, despite all its problems and sorry state, is nonetheless vibrant and in no danger of extinction. But in order for a foreign observer to understand what is going on in Turkey, reading just one newspaper is never sufficient. One must know Turkish, master the political tendencies of the various publications, read from across the spectrum, and then analyze to pick out the small grain of truth that is in there somewhere. So maybe the editors at some of the international publications mentioned at the outset might ask exactly where their correspondents are getting their information, from what sector of Turkish society, and from which publications. Hopefully they won't experience any unpleasant surprises.

Oh, and by the way: Turkey is a democracy.

NOTE/FAQ:

Because this is my first essay for **Serbestiyet**, I would like to provide some comments on my aims that can also serve as an FAQ.

1) Turkey is a parliamentary democracy. Turkish elections have been free, fair, open, and transparent since 1950. In Turkish elections votes are filled out confidentially, deposited in clear plastic boxes, and counted in front of representatives from all the political parties that provide observers, as well as civilians who care to watch. There are no electronic voting machines. The list of voters for each ballot box, usually around 350, is posted publicly and can be compared with the published results. The national Turkish Elections Board is proactive and institutes re-counts and even re-votes in places where serious accusations of voting fraud occur. The only interruptions in Turkish democracy since 1950 have been supplied by the Turkish military in 1960, 1971, 1980, and 1997. Turkish military influence in the political process was removed in 2007-2008, hopefully permanently.

2) In order to understand the Turkish press and the debates going on in Turkish politics, there is no replacement for knowledge of Turkish and, through a knowledge of Turkish, the ability to follow the debates in Turkish politics in Turkish, and in real time. Without that information one's understanding of contemporary Turkish politics will be lacking.

3) My purpose will not be to take part in domestic Turkish political debates. Instead, I plan to analyze

and criticize the international coverage of Turkey in the English-language press, including the columns of other English-language writers on Turkish issues.

4) These essays are not intended to be academic, but neither are they intended to be journalistic. Rather, they are commentary and analysis, which will hopefully be enlightening as well as mildly entertaining. At least, I will try not to bore.

5) I am American, was born in Idaho in 1971, have lived in İstanbul since 1999, and have MA and PhD degrees in History (specializing in 20th century Turkish history) from Sabancı University in İstanbul.

