

The long arm of the Turkish 'law' – a weekly news review

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The Turkish government is no respecter of national borders, especially in their attempt to exterminate Kurdish activism.

I am not only referring to military invasion. As Kurds commemorate the triple assassination, eight years ago, of three leading women activists in Paris, Turkey continues to keep Kurds and Kurdish interests in its sights, even in the heart of Europe.

Today's commemorations for Sakine Cansiz, a founding member of the PKK, Fidan Doğan, representative in Paris for the Kurdish National Congress, and Leyla Şaylemez of the Kurdish Youth Movement, are intended to do more than mark a cruel and significant loss. The man who is believed to have killed them died of a brain tumour shortly before he was due for trial, and there has still been no proper investigation into the plot. The French authorities initially closed the case, but persistent Kurdish pressure forced them to reopen it in May 2019. When it was reopened, France 24 observed that, "according to legal sources", "French investigators had concluded that members of the Turkish national intelligence agency MIT were 'implicated' in the triple murder". While there is no reason to doubt that the Turkish state was behind the murders, this has still not been given legal recognition, and French intelligence has been obstructive. Today's demonstrations are intended to make sure that the French authorities are reminded of their duty to act.

Demonstrators will also be aware that these murders are part of a long history of killings sponsored by the Turkish state. Most have been carried out within Turkey, but echoes of the Paris murders were felt just this autumn in Austria, when Berivan Aslan, a Kurdish politician from Austria's Green Party, was warned by Austrian Intelligence services that an MIT operative had confessed to them that he had been ordered to kill her. Aslan had shown that a network of MIT agents were active in Austria's immigrant communities. Austria's Interior minister has claimed that, since 2018, over thirty Austrians have been detained in Turkey and forced to work with MIT; and a German TV programme, screened in the summer, claimed that as well as dozens of MIT agents working in Germany, thousands of other people have been recruited to spy on their fellow countrymen. With Turkish Government backing, the far-right nationalist Grey Wolves are estimated to have thousands of members in the Turkish diaspora, and their activities have become so problematic that attempts are being made to outlaw their organisations.

Not content with attacking the Kurdish freedom movement, the Turkish government has managed to rope in other governments to assist, under the guise of the war against terrorism. Germany has been particularly assiduous in clamping down on anything that could be linked to the PKK or to the ideas

of Abdullah Ocalan, including shutting down Kurdish publishers. Last week, authorities at Düsseldorf Airport impounded all 500 copies of the Arabic translation of *Your Freedom and Mine*, a book on Ocalan and the Kurdish question edited by two academics, Jeff Miley and Frederico Venturini, which includes contributions from European politicians. The reason given was that the cover showed a picture of Ocalan, and the authorities say that a copy has been sent to a committee that will check its contents. Meanwhile the owner of the books is under criminal investigation. Germany's sensitivity to actions that bring back memories of its totalitarian past can, it seems, be very selective.

It has also just been reported that, in mid-December, Turkey succeeded in manipulating YouTube's regulations to close down a popular news channel based in Germany, which was run by journalists exiled from Turkey. YouTube gives special privileges to large companies to take down videos that infringe their copyright and, after three offences, to have the offending channel closed. One of these large companies is Turkey's state broadcaster, TRT. It appears that YouTube's Turkish office has ignored the fact that the videos removed had not used TRT content.

Actual plagiarism appears to be a different matter. Numerous examples of the cut and paste 'research' of Melih Bulu, who has just been appointed Rector of the well-respected university of Boğaziçi in Istanbul, have been shared on Twitter, but these have not impeded the professor's career. He is an AKP loyalist and has been imposed on the university by President Erdoğan, which is what authoritarian regimes do. University headships have been in the gift of the president since the new powers granted in 2017. When Boğaziçi students protested, calling him a 'trustee president', in reference to the government-appointed trustees imposed on municipalities that had elected HDP mayors, their protests were met with pepper-spray and plastic bullets – and the predictable allegations that they were outsiders from banned 'terrorist' groups, such as the PKK. Homes have been raided and 36 students have been detained. Detainees report that they have been strip-searched, and a human rights representative was prevented from visiting them. All of which only served to make the protests bigger.

This is real bravery in the face of a judicial system that is rotten to the core. The hollowness of the judicial façade is exemplified by a heartbreaking story of a blind man in Batman district, which was published by Mesopotamya News Agency last week.

Hasan Yalçın's entanglement with the law started when his fourteen-year-old daughter was tricked into making a statement against him. On the basis of this, the family home was raided and Yalçın was taken into custody under terrorism legislation. After four days, and without a lawyer, he signed what he believed to be his own statement. It was only after 35 people, including the local HDP co-mayor, were detained by police on the basis of this statement that he discovered he had been tricked into being a false witness.

Meanwhile, the Turkish Government has responded to the European Court of Human Rights' demand for the immediate release of imprisoned HDP co-chair, Selahattin Demirtaş, by the defiant pursuit of even more politicians – and of Demirtaş again. And they are using the same perverted account of the protests that took place when ISIS was attacking Kobanê that the European Court rejected in the earlier case. Turkey has defied hundreds of ECtHR rulings in the past without consequence, and clearly expects to do so again.

The Turkish government also continues to ignore the exhortations of the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture to allow Abdullah Ocalan to receive visits from his family and his lawyers, as required by international human rights law and Turkey's own constitution. Which is why around 2,500 political prisoners in Turkey's prisons are now on day 44 of a rotating hunger strike to call for an end to Ocalan's isolation, and also for improvements in their own prison conditions. In solidarity, there are rotating hunger strikes taking place in Maxmur refugee camp in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, in the self-governing camp of Kurdish political refugees in Lavirno in Greece, and in Kobanê; and the PKK prisoners have recently been joined by prisoners from the Marxist Leninist Communist Party, the MLKP.

At the same time as Turkey attempts to build a vision of power and control, the Turkish economy is struggling. This vision of power is all that the government is able to offer its citizens, who find daily life increasingly hard.

Last year, inflation increased to 14.6%, and the cost of food rose by much more. But the worse the reality, the more important it becomes for Erdoğan that he can control the narrative.

Another end of year report shows that 79 journalists in Turkey were detained by the police and 24 were imprisoned. As the journalist who presented the report explained, they work under constant threat and 'spent their time waiting in the corridors of the court houses or giving statements about the news they made'. Last year, 1,960 news articles were blocked, but we cannot know the number of articles that were not even written because people felt it was too dangerous to do so.

Anyone who supports the Kurdish freedom movement, wherever they are, soon becomes aware of the long reach of Turkish control, as they start to receive messages that their social media account has been shut down for a breach of community standards. This week has seen a lot of demands for the social media moguls to use their power to shut down offensive accounts. Most people don't realise that these monopolistic powers are already being used extensively, but not to silence the far right. Turkey has persuaded some of the most powerful people in the world to treat even the smallest glimpse of Ocalan's image as an existential threat. It is a unique recognition, but one we will continue to expose and resist.