

Erdogan's efforts to solve Khashoggi case have nothing to do with press freedom

by Gokcan Aydogan - 21/10/2018 12:29



Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan vows to unravel the alleged murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist, at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. But when you know Turkey's efforts to suffocate press freedom and freedom of expression within and outside of the country, you can immediately see a double standard— if not hypocrisy— in his response.

Since the failed coup attempt in 2016, Erdogan has turned Turkey into an increasingly authoritarian state, if it was not before— embodying all power, using the state of emergency to arrest tens of thousands, purging many more from state institutions and jailing dozens of journalists. Turkish officials have even admitted that they seized tens of dissidents in anti-terror operations in other countries from Europe to Africa.

Erdogan deliberately used the crackdown to target opposition and silence dissident

voices, including any independent media, by linking them to "terrorist organizations" or the failed coup. According to the Committee to Protect Journalist (CPJ), Turkey is the worst jailer of journalists in the world.

One might say, in response to this, that Turkey and Saudi Arabia have similarities when it comes to restrictions on freedoms, but killing a journalist is another level.

Then, before admiring Turkey's determination to disclose the details of the complicated murder of Khashoggi in less than two weeks, one should remember 11-year-procrastination in the case of the assassination of Hrant Dink, the prominent Armenian journalist who was shot dead in Istanbul in the middle of the day on January 19, 2007.

Dink was a newspaper editor who had written and spoken about the Armenian Genocide, and was well known for his efforts for reconciliation between Turks and Armenians and his advocacy of human and minority rights in Turkey. At the time of his death, he was on trial for violating Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code and "denigrating Turkishness". His murder sparked both massive national protests in Turkey itself as well as widespread international outrage.

Dink had long endured threats by extreme Turkish nationalists for his statements on Armenian identity and the Armenian Genocide. He regularly received emails threatening his life, responding in one instance by comparing himself to a dove, "equally obsessed by what goes on on my left and right, front and back. My head is just as mobile and fast". He complained about the indifference of the Turkish government to this the situation:

"Do you ministers know the price of making someone as scared as a dove?"

"My diary and the memory of my computer are full of messages from citizens of this circle full of rage and threats. (Let me note that I regarded one among them posted from Bursa as an imminent threat and submitted it to Public Prosecutor's office in Istanbul's Sisli district but got no results.)"

According to eyewitnesses, Dink was shot by a man of 25 to 30 years of age at noon, who fired three shots at Dink's head from the back at point-blank range before fleeing the scene on foot. Two men had been taken into custody in the first hours of the police investigation but were later released.

2 days later, news agencies reported that the shooter had been identified as "Ogun Samast", a teenager born in 1990 and registered as residing in Trabzon, the same city where, a year before Dink's assassination, the Catholic priest Andrea Santoro was shot dead by a 16-year-old native of the town, in front of the church of Santa Maria of Trabzon.

The investigations lead to the involvement of ultra-nationalist movements like the Alperen organization, the neo-fascist youth organization associated with the ultra-nationalist and Islamist party Great Union Party (BBP), created by former members of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP).

The MHP has long been the closest ally of Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). But no MHP member was touched, let alone investigated, in the aftermath of the assassination.

If Hrant Dink's never-ending assassination case isn't enough, one can talk about last week alone. An Istanbul court issued a "red notice" for journalists Can Dunder, who lives in Germany, and Ilhan Tanir, who lives in the US, on espionage charges.

A red notice serves as a request to member countries of Interpol to arrest a suspect. The suspect, Dunder, the former chief editor of an opposition newspaper Cumhuriyet, had previously been jailed in Turkey for reports that revealed Turkey's arms shipments to rebels in Syria.

International journalism organizations have all strongly condemned Turkey's media purge. The Turkish representative for Reporters Without Borders called the arrests "a witch hunt against journalists". David Kaye, the UN special rapporteur on the right to freedom of expression, said that "the attempted coup cannot justify such a broad attack against almost all voices, not just critical ones but analytic and journalistic."

"The disregard for any assurance of due process is flagrant and only contributes to the extreme levels of insecurity affecting all those working to inform people of the ongoing crisis in the country," said Dunja Mijatović, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe's representative on media freedom.

The Committee to Protect Journalist's program coordinator for central Asia, Nina Ognianova, said that the "scale of this rout of the media is staggering."

The murder of Khashoggi, disregarding his own views against many freedoms, is a gruesome attack against the freedom of press and freedom of expression. But one must realize that the Turkish government, notably Erdogan, is exploiting the situation to get the upper hand in a power play against Saudi Arabia for the future of the Middle East. Otherwise, he is nothing more than a strongman who used the state apparatus to silence the critical press when Turkey most needed pluralistic media.