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EUROPE

# Opposition Journalists Under Assault in Turkey

By CEYLAN YEGINSU SEPT. 17, 2015

ISTANBUL — Hours after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan lashed out against a prominent newspaper here, an angry mob of his supporters descended on the publication’s headquarters, smashing windows, chanting profanities and trying to storm the building.

Two days later, while the government kept silent over the episode, Mr. Erdogan bashed the newspaper for a second time, criticizing its staff for distorting his words in a Twitter post. That attack ignited a second wave of violent protest, prompting the newspaper’s editor to flee the building and make a live plea on television for police intervention.

“I’ve been a journalist for 40 years and it’s the first time I’ve been subjected to an attack involving sticks and stones,” said Sedat Ergin, the editor in chief of Hurriyet, one of Turkey’s most influential newspapers. “If our paper is being physically attacked twice in 48 hours by violent mobs, then we must accept that this is now an issue about our life safety.”

The attacks are part of a growing campaign of intimidation against the opposition news media here. Over the last two weeks, three foreign journalists have been deported from Turkey; scores of people have been investigated on accusations of insulting the president; and a magazine and opposition news media organization have been raided, with some of their executives being investigated on terrorism charges.

Even for Turkey, which is known as a hostile environment for journalists and ranks 149th out of 180 countries on the Reporters Without Borders news media

freedom index, the wave of crackdowns has been fierce, with a new trend of violent attacks inspired by Turkish politicians.

“Turkey’s steady backslide on press freedom has gone into high gear over the past month,” Nina Ognianova, the Europe and Central Asia program coordinator for the Committee to Protect Journalists, wrote in an email.

One of the leaders of the first protest against Hurriyet, on Sept. 6, was Abdurrahim Boynukalin, a deputy for the governing Justice and Development Party. He delivered a speech outside of the newspaper’s offices vowing to make Mr. Erdogan an all-powerful president by ensuring that his party wins an absolute majority in a November election.

In video footage that surfaced after the episode, Mr. Boynukalin is seen addressing a group of Justice and Development supporters expressing regret for not having assaulted Hurriyet journalists before. “Our mistake was that we never beat them in the past,” he said.

A week later, Mr. Boynukalin was promoted to the high council of his party.

“The attacks terrorized me,” said Emre Kizilkaya, the managing editor of Hurriyet Daily News, the English-language version of the newspaper. “It’s hard to feel safe at work. Hurriyet’s management is doing everything to ensure our safety, but the Turkish authorities have failed to bring the attackers to justice, and the president is yet to condemn the attack.”

Pro-government journalists have participated in the smear campaign against the newspaper. In a column last week, Cem Kucuk of the Star Newspaper accused the veteran Hurriyet columnist Ahmet Hakan of backing Kurdish rebels of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party.

“We could crush you like a fly if we want,” Mr. Kucuk wrote in his Sept. 9 column. “We have been merciful until today, and you are still alive.”

Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu expressed his disapproval of the assault on Hurriyet on Tuesday, a week after the second attack.

Media rights groups criticized the government for lagging in its response to the attacks.

“The government should make every effort to ensure acts of violence are fully investigated and those responsible brought to justice,” said Emma Sinclair-Webb, senior Turkey researcher for Human Rights Watch. “They must send out a strong message that lynch mobs should not be part of Turkey’s political culture.”

The clampdown against opposition news media outlets and their journalists is unfolding against the backdrop of a renewed conflict between Kurdish militants and Turkish security forces in the country’s volatile southeast. That, in turn, comes ahead of the critical election in November where Justice and Development aims to regain the parliamentary majority it lost in the June 7 election after more than a decade of single-party governance.

Analysts say the intimidation tactics seem to be working, with news outlets censoring their coverage of the escalating violence in the Kurdish southeast for fear of being prosecuted on terrorism charges.

Late last month, the Turkish authorities arrested two British journalists and one Iraqi journalist working for Vice News while they were covering clashes between Turkish police forces and Kurdish militants in the southeast. The Britons were deported, but their colleague remains in jail. A Dutch journalist was deported last week after being detained on suspicion of aiding the Kurdish militants.

Ms. Ognianova says the ongoing detention of the Iraqi journalist, Mohammed Ismael Rasool; the deportation of the Dutch freelancer, Frederike Geerdink; and the prosecution of journalists and news media outlets — all on broad terrorism charges — once again show that unless Turkey carries out a meaningful legal reform, the government will continue to use “archaic, vaguely worded laws” to intimidate journalists.

The Turkish police raided a weekly newsmagazine, *Nokta*, on Monday and banned its latest edition from distribution because of its cover, which depicted a mocked-up selfie of Mr. Erdogan grinning in front of the coffin of a fallen soldier. The magazine has been charged with “insulting the president” and “making terrorist propaganda.”

A couple of days after the attacks on *Hurriyet*, the newspaper’s chairwoman, Vuslat Dogan Sabanci, gathered staff members outside the vandalized building and vowed to keep producing independent journalism.

“I strongly condemn this violence that shattered the door that opens to our peace and freedoms, attacking our unity and fraternity,” she said, addressing her staff and a gathering of reporters from other publications. “The reason is our independent publishing stance, under very hard conditions. Our readers and viewers should know something well: Being targeted in attacks of intimidation by club-swinging and stone-throwing groups cannot and will not scare us.”

Almost a week later, after the newspaper replaced its shattered windows and things seemed to be back to normal — except for the presence of riot police officers in the building — Turkish prosecutors said they were investigating the newspaper for spreading “terrorist propaganda,” the semiofficial Anadolu News Agency reported.

According to the report, the office of Istanbul’s chief prosecutor accepted the front page of a pro-government tabloid newspaper as evidence to support a criminal charge.

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