Turkey Doubles Down on Civil Society Crackdowns

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In the weeks since Turkey’s November 1 parliamentary elections, the country has seen a marked increase in government repression of civil society. Turkish activists are now calling for the EU and other Western partners to put pressure on Ankara to respect fundamental civil rights.

“In the past few weeks of November, our nation, already shattered this year by multiple fundamental violations of human rights, has seen an unprecedented crackdown on media freedom, the human rights community, and the rights of ethnic minorities,” says Konya-based civil rights activist Ekrem Daloglu.

According to him, the biggest blow to morale came last week, when authorities arrested Can Dündar and Erdem Gül, editor-in-chief and Ankara bureau chief of the newspaper Cumhuriyet, respectively.

“These are some of the country’s most prominent journalists, and if the government seems comfortable attacking them, that means that no journalist, foreign or local, is safe in the country,” Daloglu laments.

Hakime Lale, a representative of Cumhuriyet, said in a phone interview that Dündar and Gül were accused of espionage, leaking of state secrets, and participation in a terrorist organization.

“These charges can mean life sentences for both, and if they are convicted, this will indeed be a dark age in Turkey’s journalism history,” she added.

Security analyst Karamat Güzel explains the new crackdown as the government’s response to increasing levels of violence and unrest.

“In response to criticism over increased arrests and attacks on civil society, the municipal governments increased violence and security threats across the country. While these threats are legitimate, we see such trends as usage of threats to justify unjustifiable attacks across the Middle East and Eurasia. One must also see that these steps by the government not only don’t help with the security, but actually make things worse,” he says.

Güzel says that one of the examples of the government’s inability to stabilize and control security is last week’s murder of pro-Kurdish lawyer Tahir Elçi, president of the Diyarbakir Bar Association in southeastern Turkey and a leading human rights defender. Elçi was killed in the street while making a press statement last Saturday.

The attack, according to Güzel, is believed to be have been carried out by militant groups, but the fact that the government was unable to prevent it speaks volumes about the current situation.

Daloglu says that instead of total control and crackdown, the government needs to listen to its people.

“The government needs to go to a wide dialogue with its ethnic minorities and it needs to work with civil society, because civil society is the justice mirror that we need so much in our country. And if the government doesn’t do that, then the European Union and other Western partners should pressure Turkish authorities to respect fundamental rights,” he adds.