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What Kind of State Is Erdogan's Turkey?

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On the February 1, 2016 Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, the UN high commissioner for human rights, held a press conference urging Turkey to investigate a report of the Turkish military shooting at unarmed civilians in the south-eastern town of Cizre.



The incident was exposed after a shocking video was uploaded on *YouTube* by a Turkish journalist. In this video, a group of civilians carrying white flag is seen walking in the vicinity of an armed military vehicle that opens fire without warning, killing and injuring an unspecified number of people. The incident occurred in southeastern Turkey where 24-hour curfews have been imposed since December as the army and police conduct operations against the Revolutionary Patriotic Youth Movement, the youth wing of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Mr Zeid expressed his concern over the actions of the Turkish security forces and a serious clampdown on the media. When referring to the clampdown, he had in mind the life imprisonment for two well-known Turkish journalists – Can Dündar, the editor-in-chief of *Cumhuriyet* newspaper, and Erdem Gül, the paper's Ankara bureau chief, Can Dündar worked as a columnist for *Milliyet*, a major Turkish daily newspaper, until he got fired in 2013 for «displeasing the prime minister [Recep Tayyip Erdoğan]» with his criticism on the government's actions with regard to the Gezi Park protests – a wave of civil unrest sparked by violent eviction of peaceful protesters against development plans for Taksim Gezi Park in Istanbul in late May 2013. Shortly afterwards, Can Dündar joined *Cumhuriyet* – an established center-left newspaper and became its editor-in-chief in February 2015.



Just before Dündar's arrest, his newspaper was awarded the 2015 Reporters Without Borders Prize for «*independent and courageous journalism*». The arrest and the Prize followed the publication of *Cumhuriyet's* report exposing arms deliveries made by Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT) to Syrian anti-government militants, that is, terrorists. After the

criminal scheme was exposed, Turkish President Erdoğan personally filed a complaint against Dündar, demanding a life sentence, an aggravated life sentence and an additional 42-year term of imprisonment for the journalist. Erdoğan lambasted Dündar for the coverage, promising in televised remarks not to let the journalist go unpunished. *«I suppose the person who wrote this as an exclusive report will pay a heavy price for this... I will not let him off lightly»*, the president said.

Importantly, the 2013 Gezi Park protests were largely downplayed and censored by Turkish mainstream media. Not for the last time, social media played a much bigger role in capturing the protests and especially the government's actions in response to the unrest, while CNN Turk aired a documentary on the life of penguins reminiscent of Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake continuous broadcast on the national TV during the 1991 coup in the USSR. To get their Manifesto out for the world to see, the protesters had to crowdfund a full page ad in *The New York Times*.

What was not shown by the Turkish media? Rubber bullets, tear gas canisters, water cannons and police batons. Officially, 11 people were killed and over 8,000 injured as a result of police brutality. 3,000 people were arrested.

Most disturbingly, health care professionals who volunteered to help the injured protesters were abused and later prosecuted. Nearby hospitals were raided, medical staff were brutally assaulted and forbidden to provide care to civilians in need of medical attention; anyone wearing a white coat was targeted by police during those days. *Associated Press* reported later that at that time Turkish authorities actually took steps to hinder formal medical care for the injured: *«Repeated requests to the Ministry of Health to increase medical resources in the protest areas, especially ambulances, were ignored... Instead, doctors had to reach out to hospitals and ambulance services run by the city's municipalities, which operate independently... government inspectors review[ed] security footage in the hospital to determine whether doctors and medical personnel had volunteered services outside shifts in the overwhelmed emergency rooms»*.

In its report on Gezi, Physicians for Human Rights concluded that the Turkish police *«attacked independent medical personnel who courageously provided care to the injured in accordance with international medical ethical standards and Turkish law»*.

A few months afterwards, the Turkish parliament accepted a health bill later signed into law that criminalized emergency medical care and allowed emergency care only *«until the arrival of formal health services»*, an outrageous restriction for many reasons, one of which is its contradiction with the over 2,000 year-old Hippocratic duty of providing care to those in need.

This was the sort of thing Can Dündar reported at that time, and this is what *«displeased»* Erdoğan.

Associated Press assumed that the government's actions during the Gezi Park protests *«undermined the reputation of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan as a democratic reformer»*.

The Guardian said that Erdoğan «*lost much of his national and international reputation*» over the Gezi Park protests. After all, there were over 3.5 million protesters of Turkey's estimated 80 million population. So, how did Mr Erdoğan win the Presidential office in 2014? Who voted for this man just a year after he ordered police brutality to commence on the streets of Istanbul? One is left to wonder...

But it is not only peaceful protesters or journalists, or health care professionals who are under fire in today's Turkey. On January 18, Nature – the world's most cited scientific journal with a monthly audience of nearly 5 million people – published an article about yet another group under state attack. That time it was the scientific community. After the ceasefire between Kurdish militants and Turkish government forces collapsed last June, thousands of civilians have been killed and even more injured or left without shelter. A 1,128-strong group of Turkish scientists from 89 national universities, known as «Academicians for Peace», signed a petition calling for an end to «*deliberate massacre and deportation of the Kurdish people*».

Harsh reaction from president Erdoğan followed immediately. During his speech on January 12, after the terrorist attacks in Istanbul, he accused those who signed the petition of supporting and spreading terrorist propaganda on behalf of Kurdish militants, thus undermining national security. «*I call upon all our institutions: everyone who benefits from this state but is now an enemy of the state must be punished without further delay*», he said.

Following Erdoğan's call, 27 academics were arrested by the police. Hundreds more are waiting to be arrested and prosecuted, just like Can Dündar and Erdem Gül. Universities have begun internal investigations with punitive actions likely to follow.

Some of the signatories have reportedly been the subject of a backlash by members of extreme right-wing groups. Erdoğan has been accused of launching a witch-hunt against the scholars.



With thousands of civilians killed and thousands arrested, with weapons supplied to terrorist groups, with ISIS support through illegal oil trade, how «bloody» is Turkey under Erdoğan's rule? Is it bloody enough to call him a dictator or are we not there yet?

We have seen a number of cases on war crimes and crimes against humanity built with the help from global human rights whistle-blowers like Amnesty International and Human Right Watch

against heads of states in recent years. How much would it take for Mr Erdoğan – who is looking up to Adolf Hitler – to do, before such case could be built against him, a NATO member-state leader? «It is not possible for a Muslim to carry out genocide», Erdoğan said in 2009. Is he setting out to prove himself wrong?