

Transformation of the Public Sphere in Turkey: Unsettled Relations between pro-Islamic and pro-Secularist Groups, and the Role of the Media

In the last three decades, Islam has acquired visibility and presence in the public life of Turkey along with other Muslim and Western societies. Islamic activism in regard to Turkey, Yavuz states, has emerged as a result of the expanding market and the changing patterns of religious authority, political liberalization and interaction with Europe (2000: 21). Through the politicization of Islam and the emergence of a new group of Muslim intellectuals, there has been a transformation of the religious identity into a modern political identity in Turkey. Communication technologies and education have played a key role in this process which enabled these new intellectuals to participate in politics, to shape the society and to reconstitute the borders between private and public, religious and secular domains. The liberalization of the media from the early 1990's onwards enabled diverse voices and opinions, in particular pro-Islamic, to address various audiences and the kinds of issues (e.g. ethnic, gender, religious) which can be debated in public have increased dramatically.

Representations of variously positioned political-ideological actors in public spaces through the media have produced two dominant understandings of public sphere: some groups, such as pro-Islamic and Kurdish, see it as a space where opinions suppressed by the Turkish state for a long time can finally be articulated and circulated; others, the statist-Kemalist elite, view it as a place for educating and informing the Turkish public. These oppositional opinions are related to the particularities of Turkish political and cultural history as well as reflecting the increased polarization in society along the following cleavages: Islamist versus secularist; Kurdish separatism versus Turkish ultra-nationalism; and liberals versus static nationalism. Within this political context, the media have become the most influential means of ideological struggle playing a significant role in transforming and redefining secular and nationalistic public culture.

The Islamic circles have realized the power of the media for some time; after the 1980 military coup, influential Islamic printing industry and media outlets began to be established. For instance, Yavuz argues "print-based discursive spaces have been at the core of Islamic political activism and have resulted in the invention of a new Islamic self-understanding in Turkey" (2003: 130). The media have increasingly become a site for power struggle since the 1990s as the Islamic groups tried to carve new spaces for themselves in the public sphere through influential media outlets. The Islamic oriented ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) which has been in power since 2002, has worked towards restructuring of media ownership and control in the Turkish media in a way that would help

maintain AKP's power and in return minimize the oppositional voices, especially the secularists. Indeed, the number of media companies owned by pro-Islamic circles has increased recently, with the enormous support they received from the government. Inevitably, this new media environment raises serious questions about the relationships between policy makers and the media, challenges such relations cause for freedom of expression. Thus this article focuses on the ways in which Islamic groups¹ in Turkey have used the media and state policies of media liberalization to construct and articulate a collective Islamic consciousness as well as a means to challenge the hegemonic, secularist state ideology. Furthermore, consequences of the media policies and practices in the 2000s will be examined.

As Yavuz states, one of the defining conflicts of modern Turkish life is “the great tension between Islamic social movements and the state ideology, *Kemalism*” (2006: 129). This conflict has also characterized the current conditions in which the media are undertaking an active role in shaping public opinion and daily politics. Two main arguments dominate the public discourse regarding to consequences of the critical relationship between media companies and political power: While the pro-Islamic groups view the new media environment as a process of democratization and pluralization of the public sphere, it is perceived by secularists and leftists as a way of fostering Islamization of the public sphere. I will address this dilemma from the perspective of critical media and cultural studies. I suggest a political economy approach to study consequences of the current media system for the range of discourses and representations in the public domain. This approach links culture to its political and economic contexts and opens up our analysis to history and politics. Golding and Murdock states that “a focal question for the political economy of communications is to investigate how changes in the array of forces which exercise control over cultural production and distribution limit or liberate the public sphere” (1991:23). They identify two key issues: the first is the pattern of ownership of such institutions and the consequences of this pattern for control over their activities. The second is the nature of the relationship between state regulation and communication institutions. By employing political economy approach, I will focus on the changing patterns of media ownership, state regulation and media policies implemented during the AKP government.

Free market policies of the 1980s marked a shift in media ownership and the state's engagement with the media sector and consequently “the transition from a highly centralized economy, heavy military influence and a state run media, to a more free market economy with privately owned media outlets, was seen by some as a moment of hope” (Christensen 2007).

¹ As many researches emphasize, even though some groups share certain characteristics and use the same discourse, Islamic groups are not monolithic in Turkey, ranging from revolutionary radical circles to certain groups organized under a political party. This variety of Islamic groups, as will be discussed later, is also reflected in the media ownership and the way the media are utilized for their purposes.

However, when the current media structure and practices are considered from a political economy framework, I argue that social, cultural and political transformation of the state and the civil society during the AKP period has resulted in forming a new media environment which, on the one hand seems to be opening up new spaces for the representations of cultural identities², on the other hand, fails to provide a pluralistic media environment and freedom of expression through a new pattern of media ownership and control. Apparently, authoritative state policies and powerful media corporations shape the media structure and media content. Recent changes in media ownership and (lack of) regulation illustrate the strategies and aggressive policies of the Islamist ruling party to maintain its political power. This political context, in turn, increasingly restricts the public sphere and polarizes the society.

I will first discuss the process of how current Islamic movements have constructed new spaces and constitute new identities in the public sphere, and then focus on the emergence of mainstream Islamic media. In order to comprehend the current political debates regarding to the media it is a necessity to provide an overview of deregulation process which determined the conditions and the context for the current controversial as well as vibrant media sector. Final chapter will examine the changes in the patterns of media ownership and control occurred during the AKP government in the 2000s and will assess these changes in regard to freedom of expression and formation of a more democratic media system.

Politicization of Islam and the Public Sphere in Turkey

Islam has acquired new forms of visibility over the last three decades as it has made its way in the public avenues of both Muslim and European societies. The rise of political Islam³ in Turkey created new public spaces and markets and in turn opened up “opportunities for new Muslim youth, intellectuals, middle classes and professional groups” (Göle and Ammann, 2006: 6). Through education, mass media and various service sectors these groups claimed a public space of their own and established new networks and Islamic practices. Thus, Islamic public visibility began to challenge the modern public sphere which was institutionalized as a site for the implementation of secular and progressive way of life. Since the establishment of the Republic, the statist ideology dominated political, cultural and social life in Turkey, vanishing of religious signs and practices from public places until the early 1980s.⁴ The

² The European Union accession process has played a significant role in changing media policies concerning representations of cultural identities. For a detailed analysis of this period see Timisi, 2005.

³ For a detailed analysis of the phenomenon of the “politicization of Islam” see Cemal Karakas, “Turkey: Islam and Laicism between the Interests of State, Politics, and Society” PRIF Reports No. 78, Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, 2007.

⁴ Thus as Yavuz (2003) points out the history of the contestation between religion and secularism is the story of the struggle between a state-imposed modernization run by a circumscribed Kemalist political elite and a popular resistance that has often assumed a religious cast. The elite used secularism to consolidate its power against society and undermine potential centers of opposition in the name of science and progress. Secularism became a

economic and political context of the 1980s marked a new era in Turkey when the statist ideology was challenged by liberal paradigm and the public life witnessed a significant transformation. The groups who claimed rights in the areas of ethnicity, religious freedom, sexuality, politics, culture and aesthetics dominated the public sphere (Çaha, 2005:22).

Islamism as a social movement offers new readings of modernity and the public sphere which does not fit into the Habermasian model of the bourgeois public sphere. The Enlightenment notion of the public sphere assumed a Universalist definition of citizens and a homogenous national sphere. Islamists in Turkey, on the contrary, consciously emphasized their difference through corporeal and spatial practices and this required a new reading of symbols, codes, meanings, roles, social structures, etc. For instance, “Islamist veiling can be seen as a performative sign of ‘difference’ which transgresses traditional as well as secular western ways of self display in public” (Göle and Ammann, 2006: 26). Thus as some researchers claim, modernization transformed Islam and brought it into the public sphere (Yavuz 2003). This transformation has altered the used of terminology to address various groups of Muslims: being a Muslim and being an Islamist are not the same thing. For instance, Nilüfer Göle (2007) states “what we are witnessing today is a shift from a Muslim to an Islamist identity... The presentation of a religious self ...is being carried from the private to the public realm”. Therefore, Islamic presence in public can be seen as a challenge to the strict separation between private religion and public secularism. The actors of this shift is the ‘modern Islamic intellectual’ as Yavuz terms and argues that “only with the emergence of a new genre of intellectuals, who modified Islamic concepts in accordance with the modern quest for identity and ethics among the youth, did Islamic knowledge and practices move from private to the public sphere.” (2003: 113-114) He adds that their identity is very much an oppositional identity: They define themselves by defining the ‘other’ as being Kemalist or modernist.

When the term Islamism is considered, we need to differentiate between Muslim, which expresses religious identity, and Islamist, which refers to a social movement “through which Muslim identity is collectively reappropriated as a basis for an alternative social and political project.” (Göle, 2002:173) Thus Islamism implies a critique; it is an attempt to rename and reconstruct Muslim identity by freeing it from traditional interpretations and by challenging assimilative forces of modernism (ibid.). Considering Islam in the public sphere in the context of Turkey, Göle points out a double movement that causes uneasiness: “Islamists seek to enter into spaces of modernity, yet they display their distinctiveness.” (2002: 186) In order to differentiate themselves and to get recognition, Islamists had to rework and reconstruct the symbols and meanings of Muslim culture. Consequently, sharing the same public spaces with

strategy of exclusion and an instrument of oppression.

the secularist ideology has resulted in unsettling between pro-Islamic and pro-secularist groups.

New Muslim groups have altered the meanings and usages of public spaces by adapting various modern practices and strategies. For example, a private, personal Muslim-self elaborated and made public through the mediation of novels and essays (Çayır, 2006); Islamic coffeehouses show the interplay between the new performances of Islamic self and attempts to transform a space (Kömüçoğlu, 2006). Islamic foundations that are established for the purposes of education of university youth according to Islamic principles provide yet another example. Türkmen (2006) defines them as an intermingling space between interior and exterior, providing students with boundary maintenance in terms of both space and identity. Thus after having been silenced throughout the Republican history, Islamic signs and practices have entered public spaces ranging from Parliament and educational institutions to entertainment and media sectors. Nilüfer Göle, who has produced a substantial amount of work on Islam and Public sphere, also emphasizes the importance of the new public faces of Islam and says “Islamic films and novels are becoming popular subjects of cultural criticism; new spaces, markets, and media are opening up in response to the rising demands of recently formed Muslim middle classes.” (2002: 173)

Flourishing of the Islamic media

Indeed, the development of Islamic media over the last three decades is connected to the Islamic movements and the emergence of a new Islamic-oriented bourgeoisie. The political context and liberal economy policies of the 1980s made it possible for Islamic political activism to construct print-based discursive spaces and to claim a public space of their own. With the open market policy and advanced communication technologies, knowledge became a commodity produced for exchange. Muslims also took advantage of this free market economy and produced Islamic ideas for mass consumption. The expansion of education initiated by the Islamic groups and the emergence of a new group of intellectuals appeared to be the main consumers of the Islamic printing industry.⁵ As Yavuz points out, “since 1983, Turkish Muslim groups have dominated the publishing market in terms of the number of books printed.” (2003: 111)⁶

⁵ In fact, Yavuz claims out that one of the major sources of current Islamic political movements is the empowering impact of technology, market forces, and increasing higher education. (2003: 113) In addition to the growth of public İmam Hatip schools (which incorporated both a religious and a modern secular curriculum), by the 1996-1997 academic year, a total of 120 out 376 private high schools (32 %) belonged to Islamic foundations and associations. (cited in Yavuz, 2003: 122).

⁶ Leading Islamic publishing houses in the market are: *Pınar, İnsan, Yöneliş, Beyan, Dergah, Nehir, Ağaç, Vadi* and *İz*.

Printing and other communication technologies have offered new possibilities for the construction and articulation of a collective Islamic consciousness. Yavuz states, “the new Islamic political identity is formed within the matrix of communications and education revolutions” (2003: 104). Interestingly, while communication technologies and education were the most powerful and effective tools of the program of secular reforms, they have become the most significant domains through which Muslim groups have challenged the secular definitions of public sphere. In addition to transforming and redefining secular and nationalistic public culture, this process also enabled diverse Muslim groups to consolidate a modern, urban Islamic identity.

Consequently, the presence of Islam in public life and its role in shaping and defining norms of daily practices and mainstream culture is increasing. Yavuz uses the term “communalization of mainstream culture” and claims that it has “a democratizing impact on the production of Islamic knowledge by freeing Islam from the control of state-centric ulema” (2003:106). Furthermore, Islamic discourses reproduced by the media have created a sense of solidarity and common identity among the Islamic groups that deepens the boundaries between them and others, in other words, between Islamists and secularists. Thus, one of the significant outcomes of this process is that “differences are freed both within the Islamic worldview and also between competing nonreligious worldviews.” (Yavuz, 2003: 130)

The crucial role of the Islamic media has been to help disseminate new meanings of Islamic principles and practices to the margins of Turkish society. Consequently, old forms of solidarity began to dissolve and a new Islamic identity is being expressed and reconstructed through the expansion “of print Islam” as Yavuz calls it (2003: 107)⁷ and later broadcasting. In the 1990s, for example, a number of the television channels, redefining certain cultural identities in relation to Islam, have come to the forefront: TGRT TV Channel, Samanyolu TV, Mesaj TV, Kanal 7 were established with an aim of promoting an Islamic way of life and a synthesis of Turkish-Islamic identity. The number of influential Islamic media outlets has increased in the 2000s, during the AKP government and the media have become the most influential means of ideological struggle between the Islamists and secularists. In order to understand the process of this struggle and the threats such conflicts cause for the democratization of the media system, I will first discuss the deregulation process in the Turkish media and then focus on changes in media ownership, media policies and strategies of the AKP government.

⁷ Printing technology is used as a means of educating the public by Islamic intellectuals. Since the 1990s, Islamic magazines, newspapers, literature have been widely disseminated and diversified. For the diversity of Islamic publications in the last decade, see Yavuz, 2003: 109-110.

An overview of deregulation in the Turkish media

The 1980s marked the beginning of a new era in Turkey: Rapid liberalization of economy process is followed by political and social liberalization. As a result, structural transformations became apparent in various sectors; the media sector entered a restructuring process too. A shift in media ownership occurred when family-owned media outlets were bought by larger companies. This process ended the state monopoly on broadcasting: Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) was the monopoly as the public broadcaster for more than 20 years. The first private commercial TV channel STAR 1 began broadcasting in 1990 via satellite from Germany. This has paved the way for the establishment of many private TV and radio channels in a short time. Three years later, the parliament lifted the monopoly on TV and radio broadcasting by amending the related article of the Constitution. Finally in 1994, a “Law on Establishment and Broadcasting of Radio and Televisions” was adopted in accordance with this amendment. The Radio Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) was established in order to regulate the private broadcasting and to control the compliance of the broadcasts with the legal framework. RTÜK is granted with the authority of giving penalties to the broadcasters for breaching the legal framework. The crucial point about the early deregulation process is that during those five years private radio and television channels operated and developed without any control and regulation. Moreover, as Pekman argues, “they set the rules of the broadcasting environment on their own and have remained without a fundamental change so far.” (2005: 271)

The most crucial feature of the deregulation process “has been the rapid entry of ‘non-media capital’ into the sector” (Pekman, 2005: 247), this consequently created a global market by diminishing traditional market boundaries. A new capital elite created by the liberal economy policies replaced the previous elite bureaucrats who were dominant since establishment of the republic. Thus, in line with the global media processes, the spread of free-market economy policies led not only to deregulation but concentration in the media sector. In this period, the relationship between the state and the capital has changed in way that the state has functioned to provide ideological support to the capitalist elite classes. Inevitably, it has influenced the media market remarkably as media owners were encouraged to expand their business cross-sectors by investing in a variety of sectors (including tourism, finance, automotive industry, construction and banking). Consequently, multi-media and multi-sectoral integration patterns characterized the Turkish media market over the last three decades. Of course, this new form of media ownership and free-market based system gave rise to a desire for power, both political and economic: media owners used media outlets to increase their political power and to enlarge their media business by increasing the profit of their investments in other sectors.⁸

⁸ Especially, the finance sector is the most common one. For example, in the early 2000s, almost all the national

As Christensen notes, the speed with which the Turkish business world explored the myriad possibilities was not matched by swift, effective action on the part of the Turkish government to regulate an increasingly hyper-commercialized, oligopolistic system (2007:183). As corporate and commercial interests have increasingly become determining factors in forming media content, media ownership patterns in free-market economies have raised important questions regarding to pluralism and diversity in media.

The Turkish state used to wield enormous power over media content, however, after the deregulation of the market, media owners have increasingly become the determining power, resulting in media companies putting pressure on policy makers and gaining control over society. Consequently, the extent of economic and political interests led media owners to abuse their dominant position; in Finkel's words "they are prepared to peddle influence in return for credits, incentives and other advantages." (2000: 156) The new ownership structure also transformed the role and meaning of journalists. For instance, Tılıç reports that "the editors-in-chief are running media institutions as managers whose powers are legitimized by their connection to the property owner." (2000:1)

In the early 2002, the former law was amended and through this new regulation big media companies gained more power: it introduced the criteria of audience ratings instead of capital share to control concentration of media ownership; it enabled media companies to enlarge their business in different sectors by allowing them to participate public tenders and be active in stock exchange; the restriction on cross-concentration was lifted; and it increased the foreign companies' share from 20% to 25%.⁹ This marked a new stage in media ownership regulation process which Pekman defines as "the adaptation of the legal order to the market conditions determined long before by big media." (2005: 282) Apparently, Pekman's definition of this process overlaps with the global patterns, as David Held observes "the role of the state has shifted from the decision maker to decision taker in the context of neo liberal hegemony." (2000: 131)

As a result of the above mentioned regulation, media ownership in Turkey today is highly concentrated. Concentration in media sector reached to a level that in 2001, two media

media groups owned a bank. Bankruptcy of some of these banks during the financial crises had drastic consequences for the media groups, as will be discussed later, some of them had huge debts and the Savings Deposit Insurance Fund (TMSF) took over their banks and media outlets. For the list of the banks and media companies which faced bankruptcy in 2000 and 2001 financial crises, see Kaymas 2008:93-95.

⁹ Global media and entertainment companies see a lot of value in Turkey: Time Warner was in Turkey as partner of CNN Turk from the beginning. NBC had licensed CNBC to Dogus Group for the creation of CNBC-e, News Corp. of the USA last year bought the controlling shares of TGRT TV and relaunched it as Fox TV. Can West of Canada has bought three important radio stations from the privatization authority, and finally, Axel Springer of Germany has bought 25% of DTV (Dogan TV).

companies, The Sabah Group and the Doğan Group, dominated 80% of the whole sector.¹⁰ This means authoritarian state control was mainly concerned with the content of the media but neglected to produce a neutral regulation and control policy for media ownership. Hence, state's ambiguous relations with media owners, in particular, with Aydın Doğan (Head of Doğan Media Group¹¹), has significant repercussions for manipulative relationships among state, capital and media policies. The next section will discuss these issues in the political context of the 2000s. However, it would be useful to mention a previous case from the late 1990s in order to illustrate an ongoing ideological struggle between power holders, especially between the Islamist and the secularist groups, and among state, the government, and media companies. When Necmettin Erbakan came to power as Turkey's first Islamist Prime Minister in 1996, he heavily criticized Doğan Media Group, then it was the country's largest media group. A year later, he was forced out, amid accusations that he had sought to replace secular rule with an Islamist dictatorship. While the military played the main role in expelling Erbakan from the government (which is called soft or post-modern coup d'état), many critics argued that Aydın Doğan helped to accelerate his downfall through a sustained anti-Islamist campaign in his newspapers and television channels.¹² This example also shows the extent to which media concentration can be a substantial threat to democracy and media pluralism.

Changes in media ownership and media regulation in the 2000s

Authoritarian state control over the media practices and its relation with the corporate popular media until the early 2000s have been scrutinized and well documented by many researchers (Kejanlioğlu, 2004; Kaya, 1994). As this body of research illustrates media policies have been produced by a delicate balance of power relations between the state and the media owners in Turkey. Political leaders in Turkey have sought to create media outlets supportive of their policies, especially since the 1980s. Such intricate power relations gained a new momentum when the Islamist party, AKP, came into power in 2002 as a single party government. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's policies and strategies towards the media in the last eight years indicate a new style in media-government relations.

Mainstream media took a favorable stance toward the AKP during its first term in power. The main drive for this attitude was the commercial interests of media owners: The AKP government introduced a large-scale privatization program. This in turn opened opportunities

¹⁰ Esra Arsan, The Bridge: A quarterly review on European integration
http://www.bridge-mag.com/magazine/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=380
Retrieved 11 March 2010.

¹¹ Doğan Holding owns around 50 percent of the Turkish media with newspapers (Hürriyet, Milliyet, Posta), magazines, television (Kanal D, CNN-Türk) and radio channels, as well as distribution networks and a news agency along with numerous non-media investments particularly in oil and energy.

¹² Economist "A Turkish Rupert Murdoch" February, 2002.

for media owners to extend their business in non-media sectors¹³ and compete in privatization tenders. As the multi-sectoral integration patterns developed, media owners forced themselves to be on good terms with the government in order to influence their chances in privatization tenders. Kaya and Kornell (2008) note that the AKP government made it a practice to use soft state power – i.e. utilizing the power to accord or not accord various companies the licenses and tenders they seek.

However, in 2007, when the AKP came into power as a single party government second time, opposition to the AKP policies grew in mainstream media as well as in the business circles. Many critics commented on the election results and claimed that the AKP became a centre-right party; its experience with the Kemalist state engendered the transformation of politically active Muslims from Islamists to Muslim Democrats.¹⁴ Additionally the government's control over media and financial issues did not fit into mainstream media's expectations. As a result of the growing polarization of Turkish politics, those media outlets which had been moderately pro-AKP began to sound more critical, particularly media outlets of the Doğan Group. Prime Minister Erdoğan's reaction to lose the support of major media outlets was quite harsh and drastically affected power relations between media owners and the government. Consequences of this process can be examined from two aspects: first, media companies owned by pro-Islamic groups has increased due to the government's support, thus manipulation of power became more apparent and systematic in media sector; second, exploitation of the media to maintain hegemonic power raises serious questions about freedom of press and media pluralism.

Economic crises occurred in 2000 and 2001 mainly produced the conditions for this media environment. Public resources were (and still are) facilitated to give financial support to the banks that went bankrupt and those holdings which owned them. The Savings Deposit Insurance Fund (TMSF) took control of the media outlets owned by the holdings in debt, e.g. Uzan Group, Dinç Bilgin Group, Karamehmet Group. This in return started a new power struggle in the media market as those media outlets handed over to TMSF came to be controlled by the political power. New managers were appointed by the government to run the media outlets before selling them in auctions.¹⁵ The legislation concerning the policy of compensating the debts caused by the banks went bankrupt, passed in 2005; four years after the financial crises. This helped the Islamist government to turn it into an opportunity and to encourage the 'green capital' invest in the media sector. Through these strategies the

¹³ For example, as privatization developed, Doğan Media Group took over the formerly state owned oil company, Petro Ofisi and a government bank, Dışbank.

¹⁴ For an analysis of this process, see Ihsan Yılmaz, "Muslim democrats in Turkey and Egypt: participatory politics as a catalyst", Insight Turkey, April, 2009.

¹⁵ Quite many television and radio channels and TV production companies were controlled by the Savings Deposit Insurance Fund. See Kaymas for the list of these channels and companies (2008: 96-7).

government has accelerated its growing influence over media outlets.

Newspapers and television channels like Zaman, Türkiye, and Yeni Safak, which are known to be defenders of conservative lines of thought and under the control of certain religious communities, have continuously provided full support for the AKP, without pointing at any of its mistakes. These newspapers practically act as official publishing organs of the AKP. Even newspapers like Star and Bugün, which changed hands because of their owners' debts, have begun to act like official AKP outlets.

Kaya and Kornell, 2008

There are various cases which provide evidence how the Savings Deposit Insurance Fund was used by the government as a useful mechanism for the ideological transformation of media ownership. For example, İhlas Holding Media Group, -owned Türkiye Newspaper, TGRT TV, TGRT FM and İhlas News Agency- failed to pay its debts but with the support of the government it was prevented from being given to the control of TMSF. TMSF initiated a new regulation to save İhlas Holding which required the holding to pay half of its debts in order to clear its entire debts. Similarly, Çukurova Holding negotiated a special deal with TMSF to pay its debts. Another example illustrative of media concentration in favor of pro-Islamist media owners is the selling of KanaTürk TV. Before the channel was taken over by the Koza Group, it was one of the influential outlets fueling opposition to the AKP. It is well-known that the Koza has good relations with Islamist circles and the AKP.¹⁶

One of the recent auctions is quite an important case to discuss with regard to changes of media ownership and its repercussions for media pluralism and freedom of speech. The Sabah ATV Group, which controlled an important part of media outlets, most notably Sabah newspaper and ATV television channel, was under control of TMSF for over a year, and then it was sold to the Çalık Group, the only group came forward with a bid. The Çalık Group's proximity to the government was already known as Prime Minister's son-in-law was (still is) its CEO. As many critics, Kaya and Kornell (2008) criticize these manipulated relations between media and politics by emphasizing the amount of the bid and the financing of the deal.¹⁷ Through the support of powerful Islamic actors the Çalık Group took over one of the biggest and most influential media groups in the country. Gaining support from a growing media market is a specifically chosen strategy by Erdoğan to maintain hegemony. One of the journalists from an oppositional newspaper, Cumhuriyet, writes that with the support of large media companies the AKP will run an aggressive ideological campaign to gain hegemonic

¹⁶ It regularly receives tenders for public schoolbooks, a huge enterprise, with the Ministry of Education commissioning millions of books, which are distributed for free to pupils. (Kaya and Kornell, 2008)

¹⁷ The state-owned Halk and Vakıf banks each provided US\$350 million for financing for the deal – the largest credits ever provided by these banks, and this was done without any demands for additional guarantees. The remainder of the financing needed was provided through a Qatari government fund. It is important to note that Çalık has participated several successful privatizations auctions the AKP has come to power.

power in order to change the constitution. (Sönmez, 2007)

The media holding companies, which support various political-ideological segments of society, are in fierce competition with each other to influence the socio-political and economic agenda of the country. Most of them have a news channel in their portfolio: Doğan Group owns CNNTürk, the Çukurova Group owns Sky Türk, the Doğu Group owns NTV, the Feza / Samanyolu group owns Samanyolu Haber, İhlas holding owns TGRT Haber. Turkuvaz being a notable exception but they do own the prominent TV station ATV. State-owned TRT has also a news channel, TRT2.

Media outlets which are supportive of AKP are: ATV Sabah Media Group (Çalık), Zaman-Samanyolu (Fethullah Community), Yeni Şafak-Kanal 7 (Albayraklar), Star-24 (İpek-Koza), Bugün. The number of influential media outlets show that pro-Islamist groups are gaining more power to compete with so called secularist media groups, the largest one being Doğan Media Group. Kaymas argues that this new phase developed within the context of already established authoritative media system and reconfirmed the way towards ‘a wild deregulation’ policies, providing several examples of neo- authoritative media system instead of a more democratic system. (2008: 81)

This new pattern of concentration in the media market outlined above shows that the majority of media outlets have come under the control of business interests which in many ways connected to the government. In addition, when recent legislation and regulations introduced by the Islamist government are concerned, the freedom of the press is increasingly called into question. For example, the government passed a new Press Law in 2004 which seemed promising at the beginning, yet, the restrictive measures in the Turkish Penal Code which came into effect in 2005 led to the prosecution of journalists and writers on various charges restricting journalists to produce truly free and critical work.¹⁸ Thus this particular legislation and the breaking of unions make the legal protection of media workers and free speech rights extremely problematic. The number of journalists prosecuted for their writings is not getting less in recent years.¹⁹ It is even increasingly getting worrying as in some cases writers and journalists have been either physically attacked or prosecuted for criticizing the AKP’s policies.²⁰

¹⁸ For a more detailed discussion see Christensen, 2007. The penal code can be found at <http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/kanunlar/k5237.html>

¹⁹ See BIA (The Countrywide Network for Monitoring and Covering Media Freedom and Independent Journalism in Turkey) Media Monitoring Desk: report 2009 about the prosecution of writers and journalists. http://www.bianet.org/files/doc_files/000/000/060/original/biarapor_090503.htm

²⁰ See the website of Contemporary Journalists Association: <http://www.cgd.org.tr>

The critical news coverage of the government has created an ongoing public debate over freedom of speech. In the last two years, in particular, Doğan Media Group became a staunch and vocal critic of the ruling Islamist party reporting insistently on corruption scandals involving prominent figures²¹ and framing Erdoğan's government as a threat to the secular order in Turkey. In response, Erdoğan has become more hostile towards Doğan Media Group to the extent that he called for his supporters to boycott this group's media outlets. The public dispute between the Prime Minister and Doğan media resulted in widening already polarized groups, pro-secularist and pro-Islamist. It is in this political context that Doğan Media Group received a record of \$2.53 billion fine for alleged tax evasion.²²

The lawsuit against Doğan has raised concerns among various groups in Turkey and abroad. For instance, a spokesman for the European Union states, "when the sanction is of such magnitude that it threatens the very existence of an entire press group, like in this case, then freedom of the press is at stake" (cited in Schleifer, 2009). Because of Doğan Group's anti-government stance, the tax penalty leaves observers undecided whether this is a fiscal or a political sanction. But Erdoğan dismisses these accusations that he is pursuing a political dispute. He says "I have no thoughts of applying political or economic pressure on the media, but certain media establishments have no right to see themselves above the law" (Sandels, 2009). While supporters of Doğan portray him as a victim of free speech, the oppositional Islamist press claims that Aydın Doğan always used his media outlets to gain political influence and win favors. For instance, Yılmaz (2009) writes "Doğan is someone who always has some business with the state, either in the form of getting financial concessions or buying state-owned enterprises at competitive prices". Similarly, Yasemin Congar, deputy editor-in-chief of the independent newspaper Taraf, and a former reporter for a Doğan newspaper says, "many media companies, including Doğan Group, became as big as they are thanks to the politicians in the past basically turning a blind eye to their misdoings, giving them extraordinary opportunities that were not given to other companies" (cited in <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/europe/09/16/turkey.press.freedom>). Moreover, Doğan is accused of favoring and protecting the interests of İstanbul business tycoons so long as they do not compete with Aydın Doğan.

It is fair to say that Doğan media represent Turkey's old elite, composed of undemocratic bureaucrats, generals, politicians and big business owners of İstanbul, Ankara and İzmir. It is thus not surprising to see that Doğan media now fully support the Republican People's Party (CHP), the political

²¹ The most significant of them is the financial misdeeds committed by the German branch of a Turkish Islamic charity with close ties to the AKP leadership.

²² Doğan Group appears already to have been affected badly from the fine imposed on it. For example, German publisher Axel Springer announced it had frozen its plan to buy a 29% stake of the Doğan Media Group.

wing of the old elite.”

Yılmaz, 2009

The polarization in the media has reached to a level which leaves journalists almost with no freedom of speech. Journalists are often accusing their rivals of distorting the truth and not covering certain stories. For example, former editor of Milliyet, Sedat Ergin says:

When such a polarization is rampant, in such a political atmosphere, every debate is held captive by this divide. Journalistically, it makes our job difficult. Ideology and strong political convictions become dominant and usually take precedence over the facts."²³

This statement clearly indicates that the media are seen as stake-holders in on-going political-ideological clashes in the country. Pro-government and pro-secularist circles are accusing each other of slanting the news in a way that seems to benefit their position. In addition to this political context, legal guidelines are making investigative journalism more difficult to expose political corruption as journalists themselves have the risk of being convicted of a crime.

Conclusion

Since Islam has entered various public places in Turkey the public sphere is rapidly undergoing changes. In this process, Muslim intellectuals have revealed the limits of the public sphere as constituted and imagined by the secularist state ideology since the 1920s. The struggle between the defenders of the authoritarian statist elite and the excluded majority of religious and ethnic groups aspiring for power shapes the current cultural and political context. It is commonplace to claim that Turkey is increasingly becoming a divided nation. The media have become an influential mechanism to gain power.

As discussed above, manipulation of the state-media relations by the political power has established a new pattern of media structure which works in line with the pro-government, pro-Islamist ideology. New public faces of Islam, modern Islamist identity seem to be well established and normalized in the national public sphere to the extent that some journalists claim pro-secularist media cannot represent the society any more.

In terms of ideology and weltanschauung, the Doğan media have never represented the average Turk. They are uncomfortable with society's religion, traditions, history, heroes and values but have endeavored to impose theirs, which are never universal but anachronistic, from top down. As society becomes more literate and education levels rise quickly, the Doğan media will have to change on this front too or they will continue to marginalize themselves.

Yılmaz 2009

²³ Cited in Daniella Kuzmanovic, <http://cuminet.blogs.ku.dk/2009/05/24/an-awful-lot-must-be-happening-around-the-clock-in-turkey>

Recent state tenders, tax fines, Prime Minister's verbal attacks on journalists, who are critical of his policies, make one question whether Doğan Media Group will be marginalized by the government or they choose to marginalize themselves. An examination of the political economy of the Turkish media helps us comprehend the problems facing media pluralism. Media policies and strategies imposed by the AKP government have two significant consequences: Political and commercial interests of large media companies -currently a significant number of them are supportive of the government- make the debate about potential abuses of owner power more crucial; and the government has extended its regulatory function in relation to the structure of the media sector and the range of permissible public expression to the extent that a vision for a democratic media system becomes more difficult to realize.

Today, unfortunately, the concept of "press freedom" often means "the independence of media owners" in Turkey. Having a balanced domain of freedom in the media market is possible with the lessening of the political authority's activity and its interference in the public sphere. It is particularly crucial in the present historical moment as the power of the media is increasingly used as an ideological means to reconstruct and legitimize a new understanding of public sphere. Against this background one could argue that recent changes in the array of power, from statist secularist to pro-Islamist, limit rather than liberate the public sphere. The Turkish media and journalistic practices in the 2000s are the reflection the particularities of the political system, cultural traits, economic conditions and a specific social and cultural history of Turkey.

Freedom of expression is facing constraints and is challenged from triangular controlling mechanism: the government, state and media owners. Obviously, journalists are in need of better legal protection. One of the means of achieving freedom of speech is to strengthen trade unions. The Journalists' Union of Turkey (TGS) emphasizes the hard working conditions and declared that "they (media owners) have carried out the provisions of neither the Press Labor Law (Act 212) nor the other relevant laws. They have not respected the trade union rights of the journalists either"²⁴. TGS calls all journalists, managers, editor-in-chiefs to join the trade union and states that the new Labor Law (Act 4857) ensures additional rights to the journalists who choose to become a member of the trade union. Some journalists, who recently dismissed from the Sabah Media Group, have gained their rights at the court. Such cases can be seen as a positive sign for the formation of a new phase in the Turkish media which may work towards establishing a more democratic media system.

Finally, regulations restricting cross-ownership are urgently needed to secure credibility and

²⁴ <http://www.ifj.org/assets/docs/180/169/5cbaeb4-61c46a9.doc>

pluralism. Şahin Alpay who defines himself as a social democrat, who is a scholar and columnist in Zaman and Today's Zaman –known as pro-Islamist- points out the importance of prohibiting cross-over ownership with reference to Doğan Media Group. He says, “he [Doğan] poses as if he owns the country. They must break down the concentration of ownership. The government must introduce legislation to stop this from ever happening again,” (cited in Sandels 2009). Unfortunately, media policies of the AKP government have resulted in constructing a new pattern of concentration through which the AKP has acquired unprecedented influence in the media. There seems to be no attempt to ‘regulate’ the media in a way that might vanish the role of politicians as stake-holders in on-going political-ideological conflicts. Hopefully, the negotiation process for Turkey’s accession to European Union will continue, and oppositional groups in society will come to terms with developing a common understanding of democracy responding to the needs and rights of all groups in society. It is this kind of progress that can bring Turkey a better understanding of pluralism in regard to freedom of speech and freedom of expression.

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