

Turkish writers need our support

In late January, a 23-member PEN International delegation traveled to Istanbul to investigate the crackdown on Turkish intellectuals following the failed coup in July 2016.

We met with writers, journalists and publishers, visited newspapers whose staff had been decimated by arrests, and recorded heart-wrenching testimonies. We also attempted to stage a peaceful demonstration of support in front of Silivri prison, but were prevented by military police to do anything beyond steal a quick group photo.

One hundred and fifty journalists have been arrested and are detained since the failed coup, while ten thousand of their colleagues have been fired and blacklisted under the suspicion of being critical of the regime, which not only denies them access to a media outlet for their work, but deprives them of their livelihood.

Forty-five publications, sixteen TV channels, twenty-three radios, three press agencies and twenty-nine publishing houses have been shut down.

As a concession to international opinion, police custody was cut back from thirty to seven days...except for crimes linked to terrorism. And it so happens that suspicion of terrorist activity or of the promotion of terrorism is precisely what is invoked to justify the arrest of intellectuals. Judges having – understandably! – trouble pressing charges on such grounds for lack of evidence, but being under orders from higher-ups, statutory detention can last months in violation of the law. All the while, prisoners are neither formally indicted, nor informed of pending charges. Kurdish intellectuals tend to be the target of a particular ferocity.

Such a situation has led the writer Asli Erdogan (no relation to the president) to ask the following question: “Why does Turkey hate its intellectuals so much? The government prides itself on being nationalistic, but shouldn’t a nation’s power also be measured by its intellectual output, by its culture?”

Such a mystery can be comprehended only in light of the referendum proposing a change of the Turkish constitution that would, if voted, endow Recep Tayyip Erdogan with full powers in April. Muzzling dissenting voices is nothing but a means to increase the president’s chances of seeing it approved. It is time to let him know, by all available means, that if his power grab succeeds, it will be at the expense of his country’s international standing.

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(Hachette Livre is a founding member of PEN’s Publishers Circle)