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Turkey: Pre-election takeover of opposition media outlets a major blow to freedom of expression

Amnesty International calls on the Turkish authorities to ensure that media outlets that are part of the Koza İpek group can report freely and independently after government trustees were sent in to replace the senior management of the group yesterday. The raids are yet another shocking attack on journalists and freedom of expression in Turkey, and come just four days before a crucial parliamentary election on Sunday.

The Koza İpek group contains outlets that span television, print and online media, including *Millet* and *Bugün* newspapers and the *Bugün* and *Kanaltürk* news channels. All are fierce critics of the Justice and Development Party (AK Parti) government. Today's actions come in an environment in which journalists, human rights defenders, activists and ordinary citizens are routinely prosecuted and brought to trial for peacefully expressing their legitimate opinions.

This afternoon, broadcasts by the Kanaltürk and Bugün news channels were cut after government trustees entered the building with policemen who forced their way in. Tarık Toros, editor-in-chief of the Kanaltürk channel, was removed from his duties and taken from the building in handcuffs by police.

On Monday, an Ankara court granted the prosecutor's request to send in government trustees to replace the senior management of the Koza İpek group. The order was justified on the grounds of "strong suspicion of [the group] committing crimes". The move follows a September raid on the headquarters of the Koza İpek group as part of an ongoing investigation into the financing of terrorism in the context of alleged links between the group and what the government has designated a "Fetullah Gülen terrorist organization".

The rupture between the government and Fetullah Gülen, an influential preacher and former close ally of the government, intensified in December 2013 when the authorities acted to crush a criminal investigation into alleged corruption within the inner circle of then Prime Minister Erdoğan. The government branded the investigation a plot by a "parallel structure" of supporters of Fethullah Gülen in the police and judiciary, and vowed to take further action against him and his network of supporters.

Earlier this week, prosecutors in Istanbul submitted an indictment to the court accusing 122 people, including Fethullah Gülen, of charges including "leading or founding an armed terrorist organisation".

The recent attacks against the Koza İpek group provide yet another example of the authorities' efforts to silence dissent by harassing and intimidating government critics.

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