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The public detentions in Turkey of journalists that appear to be without sufficient evidence they committed a criminal offense will harm media freedom and chill free speech, Human Rights Watch said today. On December 14, 2014, the editor of the daily Zaman newspaper was arrested, along with the head of Samanyolu broadcasting group and other media personnel.

The arrests, and those of senior police officers and others, are linked to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's move against what he describes as the "parallel structure," followers of the US-based Turkish Sunni cleric Fethullah Gülen. Erdoğan has said he believes Gülen attempted to overthrow his government by alleging government-linked corruption in December 2013.

"It looks like the media is once again a target in Erdoğan's political fight with his former Gülenist allies," said Emma Sinclair-Webb, senior Turkey researcher at Human Rights Watch. "The timing and the limited evidence made public suggests these arrests are politically motivated, not based on reasonable suspicion of a criminal offense."

In a December 12 speech, Erdoğan warned that the arrests would take place. The EU has criticized the arrests, and the US State Department has expressed concern.

A December 13 warrant, issued by an Istanbul judge authorizing the detention of 31 individuals and the search of their homes and workplaces, stated that they were under criminal investigation for forming an organization that had "by pressure, intimidation and threats attempted to seize state power" and had done so "through lies, depriving people of their liberty and falsifying documents."

Among those named as suspects include Ekrem Dumanlı, general editor of Zaman newspaper, the largest circulation daily in Turkey; Hidayet Karaca, head of the Samanyolu Broadcasting group; a Zaman columnist; a journalist from Bugün newspaper; and three media workers working on Samanyolu group soap operas.

A second statement by the prosecutor on the morning of December 14 after the arrests had begun indicated that the suspects were being investigated for forming an armed organization that had falsified evidence and made broadcasts on "the Tahşiye criminal organization." Turkish media report that Tahşiye is a religious group that was the subject of a criminal investigation in 2010 for being an alleged terrorist organization. This resulted in the detention of its members, acquittals in two cities, and an ongoing trial in Istanbul.

While the details of the evidence have not been made public and the prosecutor's investigation continues, the implication of the charge against Dumanlı and Karaca is that they were involved in disseminating false information about the Tahşiye religious group through the media.

But the timing of this operation comes almost exactly a year after the December 17, 2013, corruption allegations broke, said Human Rights Watch. The corruption-related arrests and allegations have been a repeated focus of Zaman and Samanyolu group reporting.

Human rights organizations have identified a pattern of the misuse of terrorism and coup-plot charges against journalists and media outlets critical of the ruling party, often resulting in lengthy pretrial detention. These arrests have a chilling effect of media freedom in Turkey. Mass arrests and prosecutions of journalists have included the March 2011 arrests of journalists Ahmet Şık, Nedim Şener, and others working for the Oda TV website, resulting in their imprisonment during their trial for periods between one and two years, and the December 2011 arrests of 46 Kurdish journalists and media workers, some of whom spent over two years in prison during their trials, which are ongoing.

"Arresting journalists around the corruption anniversary suggests an effort to discredit and intimidate Gülenist media," Sinclair-Webb said. "The arrests fit the familiar pattern of pursuing journalists for alleged membership of illegal organizations in order to silence critical media."

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