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Briefing Notes Summary

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Türkiye – January to June 2024

30 June 2024

22 January 2024

Arrest of pro-Kurdish activists

Turkish police carried out several raids in 28 provinces on 16.01.24 and arrested a total of 165 people, including members of the pro-Kurdish People's Equity and Democracy Party (DEM), for suspected links to terrorist organisations.

The Ministry of the Interior stated that the detainees had been arrested for allegedly supporting the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) or spreading PKK propaganda on social media. Among those detained were several members of the so-called Peace Mothers, a group of activists who have been campaigning for a peaceful solution to the conflict between the state and the PKK, as well as members of the DEM's youth and women's networks.¹

29 January 2024

Attack at Catholic church in Istanbul

On 28.01.24, two masked men carried out an attack in the Santa Maria Church in the Sarıyer district of Istanbul, according to the Ministry of Interior.

According to Turkish authorities, it was a targeted assassination of an individual. The attack took place during a church service attended by around 40 people. According to the governor of Istanbul, no other people were injured. According to the Ministry of Interior, the police arrested two suspects as they fled the scene.²

05 February 2024

Arrests following attack on church

According to the Ministry of Interior, security forces arrested a total of 34 foreign nationals over their suspected links with ISIS and other terrorist organisations on 03.02.24.

The detainees include people who were wanted with an Interpol red notice. The suspects were detained in anti-terror operations that were carried out simultaneously in the provinces of Istanbul, Kocaeli, Yalova, Kayseri, Bursa, Düzce and Yozgat. Firearms, money in foreign currency and digital material were also seized during the operations. The operation took place after two armed men carried out an attack at the Santa Maria Church in the Sarıyer district of Istanbul on 28.01.24 (cf. BN of 29.01.24). ISIS has claimed responsibility for the attack.³

19 February 2024

Sentencing of journalists

On 14.02.24, the 26th Istanbul Court of Serious Crimes sentenced journalists Ahmet Altan, Nazlı Ilıcak and Fevzi Yazıcı to prison for "assisting a terrorist organisation without being a member". The court found the three individuals guilty over their alleged ties to the exiled preacher Fethullah Gülen, whom the government holds responsible for the failed military coup in 2016. The court sentenced Altan to six years and three and a half months, Ilıcak to five years and three months and Yazıcı to two years and one month in prison. The three journalists have been enmeshed in multiple appeals and retrials since they were arrested in 2016 and sentenced to life imprisonment in 2018. Ilıcak was released from prison in 2019, Altan in 2021 and Yazıcı in March 2023. Ilıcak was imprisoned from 04.12.23 to 28.01.24 after losing an appeal relating to the charge of slander in connection with a 2016 column.⁴

26 February 2024

Arrested for online comment about Sharia

Istanbul lawyer and women's rights activist Feyza Altun was arrested on 19.02.24 for making a derogatory comment on the social media platform X about Sharia, the set of Islamic legal principles.

The General Prosecution Office in Beykoz district had initiated the relevant investigation on the basis of Article 216 of the Turkish Criminal Code. Under this article, anyone who openly incites sections of society to hostility or hatred against another group on the basis of social class, race, religion or denominational or regional differences in a way that may pose a clear and immediate danger to public safety is liable to a prison sentence of one to three years.

Altun was conditionally released from custody on 20.02.24. She has to report to a police station twice a week and is banned from leaving the country. On the same day, the Turkish Department of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) also filed a criminal complaint against the lawyer with the Ankara Public Prosecutor's Office for insulting religious values and inciting hatred and enmity among the population. According to Diyanet, Altun's statements about Sharia violate the Turkish constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights and should therefore have consequences under criminal law.⁵

04 March 2024

Violence against women: eight murders in two days

According to media reports, seven women aged between 32 and 49 were killed by their partners or ex-partners across Turkey on 27.02.24. Another woman was allegedly killed by her father on 28.02.24. The eight women were killed in Izmir, Adıyaman, Istanbul, Denizli, Erzurum, Bursa and Sakarya. Three of the perpetrators subsequently took their own lives, two were arrested and one perpetrator, who was wounded while being detained, succumbed to his injuries. Two other perpetrators are on the run.

In 2023, the NGO "We Will Stop Femicide Platform" (Kadın Cinayetleri Durduracağız Platformu (KCDP)) recorded 315 murders of women, 65 percent of whom were killed in their own homes. A further 248 deaths, which were labelled as suicides by the Turkish authorities, are considered suspicious by KCDP. KCDP attributes the women's deaths to the actions of third parties and points to an increase in window-falling incidents among the deceased women.

In the Turkish Criminal Code, Law 6284 provides for the protection of women from violence in general and domestic violence in particular. However, women's rights organisations note that women who rely on this law are sometimes denied protection by the police. According to KCDP, it can happen that the police do not take reports of domestic violence seriously and women are often sent home afterwards. KCDP has called for a protest and held a rally in Istanbul's Kadıköy district on 03.03.24 in the run-up to this year's International Women's Day. Against the backdrop of Türkiye's withdrawal from the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, the so-called Istanbul Convention, in 2021, KCDP stated that the only year in which the number of femicides had decreased was 2011. This was the year in which Türkiye adopted the Istanbul Convention, which is binding under international law.⁶

11 March 2024

Nationwide rallies as part of International Women's Day

Despite an official ban, thousands of people took to the streets on 08.03.24, mainly in Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir, to celebrate International Women's Day.

They demanded equal rights and changes to the law in order to better protect women. Although the police had blocked access to the streets leading to Taksim Square in Istanbul several hours in advance, participants said they found ways to get to the venue and take part in the protest.

There were clashes with the police in the run-up to International Women's Day. On 07.03.24, security forces intervened at a demonstration by students from Istanbul University. Some of the demonstrators were subsequently arrested by the police. Clashes also erupted between demonstrators and the police on 08.03.24, particularly in Istanbul on the way to Taksim Square. Rallies organised by women's groups and the Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (Halkların Eşitlik ve Demokrasi Partisi (DEM)) also took place in the Kurdish provinces to mark International Women's Day. Rallies marking International Women's Day took place in Diyarbakır, Batman, Şırnak, Mardin, Van, Mersin and Elazığ, among other places. At the rallies, the ruling AKP party in particular was criticised for its policies regarding women's rights.⁷

Seven people arrested on charges of spying for Israel

On 05.03.24, the Turkish police arrested seven people who are suspected of having engaged in foreign espionage. One suspect was released on bail on 08.03.24.

Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya said that the suspects were arrested during simultaneous raids in Istanbul. They are suspected of collecting data on individuals and companies in Türkiye and selling it to the Israeli secret service, Mossad. The state news agency Anadolu reported, citing unnamed security officials, that the detainees included a former civil servant who was currently working as a private detective.

Seven other people, including private detectives, were previously arrested in February 2024 on similar suspicions. Turkish police also arrested a total of 34 people in early January 2024 on suspicion of spying for Israel. Justice Minister Yılmaz Tunc explained that most of the suspects arrested in January 2024 had been charged with political or military espionage for the Israeli secret service.⁸

18 March 2024

Arrest of suspected Gülen members

According to media reports, the police and gendarmerie carried out house searches in seven provinces on 12.03.24 to arrest active and former soldiers and former military cadets who are suspected of having links to the Gülen movement.

The raids were carried out as part of investigations in İzmir, where prosecutors issued arrest warrants for a total of 23 people, including nine soldiers, six of whom were on active duty, and 14 cadets who had previously been removed from military schools. Following the arrest of 18 people in the raids, the security forces are now searching for the remaining five people, two of whom are reported to be abroad. According to the reports, the detainees were targeted by the security forces on the basis of witness statements accusing them of being suspected Gülen supporters and based on their alleged phone communications.

Previously, in early March, Turkish police arrested 91 people in 30 provinces for suspected links to the Gülen movement. The people were arrested for allegedly infiltrating the military and police and for using the messaging app ByLock. Among those arrested were people whose convictions for links to the Gülen movement had been confirmed by the Court of Cassation and who had been at large until their current arrest.⁹

Türkiye ranks 164th among 179 countries in the Academic Freedom Index

The Academic Freedom Index (AFI) published by Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg for 2023, which assesses de facto levels of academic freedom around the world, ranks Türkiye in the bottom 10 percent, just ahead of countries such as North Korea, Myanmar and Iran.

The Index reports that in the last 15 years, the quantified value of academic freedom in Türkiye has fallen by more than 83 percent. The Index is based on five key indicators, including the freedom of research and teaching and the

institutional autonomy of universities. The downward trend in academic freedom is primarily due to the events following the attempted coup in 2016. Since then, more than 30,000 teaching staff and 7,000 academics have been dismissed. Another factor the decision taken by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2016 to abolish internal university elections for the selection of rectors and to replace them with direct appointments by the president.¹⁰

25 March 2024

Around 70 people arrested in the context of Nowruz celebrations

According to media reports, around 70 people, including an AFP journalist, were detained by police in Istanbul on 17.03.24 on the sidelines of Kurdish celebrations in the run-up to Nowruz, the Persian calendar New Year celebrated on 20.03.24.

AFP video journalist Eylül Yaşar said she was detained and taken to a police van after she resisted a body search. She was detained by police for six hours along with 14 other people and then released. According to Yaşar, she and the other people detained were verbally abused and threatened by the police. In a statement, the international press agency AFP said that it regretted the arrest, welcomed the subsequent release and called on the Turkish authorities to respect the rights of journalists.

Two journalists from the news website Bianet, who had filmed the arrests, reported that they had been beaten and thrown to the ground by the police. According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Türkiye ranked 164th out of 180 countries on the Press Freedom Index in 2023. This represented a drop of 16 places compared to 2022.¹¹

Journalist sentenced to 11 months and 20 days in prison for insulting the president

On 19.03.24, the 44th Criminal Court in Bakırköy sentenced the journalist Levent Gültekin to 11 months and 20 days in prison for insulting the President in a programme aired on the Halk TV channel in 2022. During the hearing, Gültekin requested his acquittal. In his defence, he argued that he had sharply criticised a speech made by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan after a terrorist attack in the southern Turkish district of Mersin. The journalist added that criticism was his responsibility as a journalist, and his remarks did not constitute an insult.

The prosecutor argued that Gültekin's remark criticised Erdoğan's political stance, but really constituted a personal insult because it involved Erdoğan's name. Gültekin had said in the programme aired on 27.09.22 that Erdoğan was behaving like a schoolchild.

Gültekin is the 75th journalist to be sentenced by the courts under Article 299 of the Turkish Criminal Code (Türk Ceza Kanunu), which criminalises insulting the president. According to press reports, prosecutors initiated a total of 52,348 investigations against individuals for insulting President Erdoğan or his government between 2019 and 2022. Citizens were also investigated on the basis of Article 301 of the Turkish Criminal Code, which criminalises insulting the Turkish nation, the state of the Turkish Republic and the institutions and organs of the state. During the terms in office of the five presidents who preceded Erdoğan, 1,716 insult cases were filed. Anyone who insults the president can be punished with up to four years in prison. Any person who criticises the government can be punished with up to two years in prison.¹²

08 April 2024

Results of the local elections held on 31.03.24

Türkiye's main opposition party, the Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP), has won local elections in the three largest cities of Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir. In the run-up to the elections, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had expressed the hope that his Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) would regain control of the cities. Ekrem İmamoğlu, who had won the election in Istanbul for the first time in 2019, secured his second victory as mayor for the secular CHP with 51.1 percent of the vote. In the capital Ankara, Mansur Yavaş, the CHP mayor in office since 2019, gained 60.4 percent of the vote. The AKP candidate, Turgut Altınok, attained 31.7 percent.

According to the official results, the CHP won 35 out of 81 municipalities, including 14 out of 30 urban areas in the country. The CHP also won control of Türkiye's fourth largest city, Bursa, as well as Adıyaman, which was hit hard by last year's double earthquake in the south-eastern part of the country. Nationwide, the CHP secured 37.8 percent of the vote. The AKP won 24 of 81 municipalities and received 35.5 percent of the vote. In the last local elections

on 31 March 2019, the AKP had secured 44.3 percent of the vote. The pro-Kurdish Halkların Eşitlik ve Demokrasi Partisi (DEM) won ten of the 81 municipalities, most of them in the south-east of the country.

After the election, objections to the results were raised in some municipalities. For example, the supreme electoral council ordered a recount of the votes in Kütahya after the nationalist Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP) filed an objection. After the recount, the supreme electoral council confirmed the victory of the CHP candidate in Kütahya and at the same time ordered new elections in several districts of the country. While the results of the recount were confirmed, the supreme election council announced the decision to repeat the elections in several districts in central Türkiye, among them Pınarbaşı in Kayseri and Ürgüp in Nevşehir, both of which were won by the CHP. In the southeastern city of Şanlıurfa, the elections in the Hilvan district, which were won by the DEM, will be repeated due to objections by the AKP.

Meanwhile, the decision to repeat the elections in the north-eastern city of Ardahan, which was taken after an objection lodged by the AKP, was revoked by the provincial board of the election council. This development followed the controversy surrounding the cancellation of Abdullah Zeydan's mayoral mandate in the eastern city of Van. Zeydan, a DEM politician, had been temporarily replaced by an AKP candidate following a court judgement over a previous imprisonment, which led to demonstrations in several cities. On 03.04.24, the highest electoral authority informed that that Zeydan's mayoral mandate was reinstated, and finally declared Abdullah Zeydan the new mayor of Van.

President Erdoğan conceded defeat and admitted that the election had not gone as he had hoped. This election has been the first nationwide defeat for the AKP since Erdoğan came to power 21 years ago.¹³

15 April 2024

Columnist arrested

Media report that on 13.04.24, columnist Evren Barış Yavuz was detained in Istanbul and taken to a police station. An arrest warrant was also issued for him. Yavuz had shared a photo on "X" of a Palestine rally organised by government supporters and criticised the fact that the government supporters had sold paraffin. The background to this is a list set up the trade ministry on 09.04.24 containing 54 types of products, including aviation fuel and jet fuel, whose export to Israel was restricted. The photo also shows the rector of Boğaziçi University, Naci İnci, and the owners of Baykar, manufacturer of unmanned aerial vehicles, Selçuk Bayraktar, son-in-law of AKP Chairman and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and his brother Haluk Bayraktar.

Baykar board member Haluk Bayraktar stated that Yavuz wrote an article on his website entitled "Why Alevis should have a PKK" and that he is a member of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu's team. The İstanbul metropolitan municipality (Büyükşehir Belediyesi İBB) responded that Bayraktar's statements were lies and slander and announced to file a criminal complaint against the Baykar manager. Yavuz himself said that he had never worked at İBB and that the article "Why Alevis should have a PKK" had been written eleven years ago by another person on a website administered by him.

Investigation proceedings have been initiated against Yavuz for "inciting or insulting the public to hatred and hostility", "incitement to commit a criminal offence" and "propaganda for a terrorist organisation".¹⁴

Musician's arm broken in custody

Media reports say that Bahar Kurt, a member of the political music group "Grup Yorum", had her arm broken in Izmir's closed women's prison in Şakran. Her lawyer has informed that she and her client have filed a criminal complaint with the Izmir chief public prosecutor's office against the guards for torture and ill-treatment.

According to her lawyer, Kurt's arm was broken by female guards who came to search the cell on 26.03.24. In addition, Bahar Kurt was apparently arrested without any evidence against her. The news portal Bianet has access to Bahar Kurt's x-rays and presented the images to medical professionals who said that an operation was necessary, which has not yet happened. Bahar Kurt was taken to hospital on 04.04.24, where she was put in a plaster cast after she had decided against an operation as this might have led to a paralysis of her hands and fingers, according to medical staff.¹⁵

Attack on trans women in Izmir

Media report that on 10.04.24, several trans women were insulted and attacked by a group of ten to 15 people on Bornova Street in İzmir while they were helping a man who suffered an epileptic seizure. During the attack, one trans woman was injured and robbed of her wallet and phone.

The attackers then began throwing stones at the homes of trans women, as shown by security camera footage. The authorities have confirmed that they are investigating the matter. The trans women announced that they would press charges. Izmir bar association members responded to the attack, stating that the location where the attack took place was about 400 meters from the Alsancak police station and 100 meters from checkpoints. There were also security guards patrolling the street, the lawyers said, so that it was impossible that the law enforcement officers were unaware of the attack. On the contrary, the bar association members added, it often happened that security guards attacked trans people simply because they exist. Apparently, the security guards and police did not intervene because the person attacked was a trans woman. The Izmir bar association also announced that it would take action against hate attacks against trans people.

Bornova Street is considered the home of trans women in İzmir. The threat of eviction from the living and working spaces of trans people in the Alsancak neighbourhood, where Bornova Street is located, has led to an unsafe environment for the trans people living there. LGBTIQ rights in Türkiye have come under pressure in recent years. Bayram Street in Istanbul, where also many trans women live, was recently closed and houses where trans women live were sealed for three months from 04.03.24, resulting in homelessness for trans women. There have been arrests at street events. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has labelled LGBTIQ people as "perverts", "deviants" and "viruses" in the past.

According to the Rainbow Index, Türkiye currently ranks second to last in Europe in terms of LGBTIQ rights.¹⁶

22 April 2024

Supreme Court cancels disciplinary sanctions for political activities on campus

Media report that the Constitutional Court (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Anayasa Mahkemesi) annulled the article of the Higher Education Act providing for disciplinary sanctions for distributing leaflets and hanging posters or banners at universities and organising meetings without permission.

The Republican People's Party (CHP) had applied to the Constitutional Court for the repeal of some articles of Law No. 7437 on the amendment of the higher education system, which had been passed by the Turkish Grand National Assembly on 02.02.23. In his assessment of 22.04.24, the Supreme Court annulled individual articles of the new law.

The provision on distributing flyers, hanging banners or posters without authorisation within a higher education institution, which is to be applied in accordance with Article 54 of the Higher Education Act for cases requiring disciplinary punishment in the form of a reprimand, was declared unconstitutional and annulled. In its reasoning, the court pointed out that the formal existence of a legal regulation is not sufficient to restrict freedom of expression, but that legal regulations must be specific and foreseeable such as not to allow for arbitrary rulings.

Also the sanction of organising assemblies in closed or open spaces of higher education institutions without permission from the authorities, which provided for a suspension from the institution of one week to one month, was declared unconstitutional. The decision emphasised that this provision restricted the right of university students to organise assemblies and demonstrations.

The decision emphasised that the previous sanctions were not compatible with the requirements of a democratic social order.¹⁷

Earthquake of magnitude 5.6 in Tokat and Yozgat provinces

Media report that the provinces of Tokat and Yozgat were hit by a magnitude 5.6 earthquake, damaging several houses, barns, and mosques in Tokat and the nearby province of Yozgat. The earthquake occurred on 18.04.24 in the town of Sulusaray in Artova district, northern Tokat province.

The tremors damaged 191 houses, 84 barns, seven mosques and a bakery in 30 villages in three different districts. After the 5.6-magnitude quake, three aftershocks with magnitudes of 4.0 to 4.4 were recorded in Tokat province. The mayor of Sulusaray city stated that relief workers were able to reach all villages in the district. The governor of

Tokat province informed that there were no deaths or injuries. In some villages, the Turkish Red Crescent has set up tents for the residents of damaged houses.

In February 2023, parts of southern Türkiye and Syria had been hit by a magnitude 7.8 earthquake, which had killed more than 53,000 people in Türkiye. To this day, over half a million people are still living in emergency shelters.¹⁸

Council of Europe calls on Türkiye to release political prisoners

Media report that in its annual report, the Council of Europe Europe's Committee of Ministers, which monitors the enforcement of judgements by the European Court Human Rights (ECHR), has called on Türkiye to reform its criminal and anti-terrorism laws and release political prisoners. The committee emphasised that Türkiye continues to struggle with issues of freedom of expression and assembly, the independence of the judiciary, detention without clear justification and domestic violence.

The committee also referred to the entrepreneur Osman Kavala, who has been in detention since 2017 and was handed down a life sentence in 2022. In its ruling of December 2019, the ECHR had stated that Kavala's imprisonment was arbitrary and politically motivated. Türkiye's failure to implement the 2019 ruling prompted the Committee to initiate infringement proceedings in February 2022.

In addition to the Kavala case, the committee also referred to the detention of the two politicians Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ. Despite previous ECHR rulings, which had found violations of their rights through the waiver of parliamentary immunity and unjustified detention, both politicians remain in detention. The committee called for their immediate release.

The committee also examined Türkiye's handling of the right to freedom of expression, particularly with regard to criminal proceedings against journalists. The committee urged on Türkiye to clearly stipulate in its laws that the exercise of freedom of expression should not constitute a criminal offence.

The monitoring report also addressed structural problems within the Turkish judiciary and referred to the ECHR ruling of September 2023 regarding the teacher Yüksel Yalçınkaya. In this case, the ECHR had ruled that the conviction for terrorism offences based on the accused's use of the ByLock messaging app was unlawful and called on the Turkish authorities to find an alternative solution to the problem, which the ECHR referred to as systemic. ByLock is at the centre of proceedings involving thousands of people accused of being close to the Gülen movement and whose cases are pending before national courts or the ECHR.¹⁹

29 April 2024

Arrest of journalists

According to media reports, nine journalists working for pro-Kurdish news media were arrested in raids in three provinces on 23.04.24.

In Istanbul, a journalist from the Mezopotamya Agency and one journalist each from the newspapers Yeni Yaşam and Yeni Özgür Politika were arrested, along with four other press workers. In Ankara, a journalist from the Mezopotamya Agency was arrested. In Urfa, a former correspondent of the Mezopotamya Agency was arrested during a house search. Following the arrest, the authorities restricted the detainees' contact with their lawyers.

The arrest report states that the journalists had links to the PKK. According to their lawyers, the police also asked questions about the media organisations for which the journalists work.

Gülistan Kılıç-Koçyiğit, deputy leader of the Peoples' Emancipation and Democracy Party (DEM), said the arrests were an attack on press freedom and the Kurdish Journalists' Day on 22.04.24, which is dedicated to the struggle for a free press.

22 April is the anniversary of the first edition of a daily newspaper named Kurdistan, which had been published on 22.04.1898. On this occasion, Kurdish journalists celebrate Kurdistan Journalists' Day every year.²⁰

Police raid DEM provincial office

On 24.04.24, following an anonymous tip-off, police raided the provincial office of the pro-Kurdish DEM party in Batman.

According to media reports from 24.04.24, an anonymous email was sent to the Batman provincial directorate of security, information technology and communications on 21.04.24, stating that PKK flags and a photo of Abdullah Öcalan had been seen in the provincial building of the DEM party. The e-mail also asked for action to be taken and

for the sender's identity to be kept confidential. According to media reports, the subsequent raid took place as part of a terror investigation. During the search, which lasted around four hours, documents and photos of several PKK fighters who had been killed were allegedly confiscated. After the raid, DEM party members gathered in front of the provincial office and the provincial level co-chair of the DEM party, Mustafa Mesut Tekik, issued a press statement saying that there had been manipulations and attempts to criminalise the DEM Party. According to Tekik, legitimate cultural, art and literary magazines have been confiscated, as well as photos of people killed in the struggle for democracy.²¹

06 May 2024

Nationwide demonstrations on 1 May

Media report that on 01.05.24, Labour Day, police used tear gas and rubber bullets in Istanbul to disperse demonstrators who tried to break through barricades to reach Taksim Square in Beyoğlu district. Police and demonstrators also clashed near the city hall in Istanbul's Sarachane district.

There are differing reports on the number of people arrested. According to the Turkish interior minister Ali Yerlikaya, a total of 217 people were arrested in Istanbul on 01.05.24. A lawyers' association providing legal support to demonstrators says that at least 216 people were arrested throughout Istanbul on 01.05.24. Arrest warrants were issued for 35 of those detained. 182 detainees have been released from custody. Interior minister Yerlikaya stated that a total of 226 arrests were made throughout the country, including the arrests in Istanbul.

Around 42,000 police officers were deployed throughout the city, blocking off streets with metal barriers after President Erdoğan declared on 30.04.24 that the annual Labour Day protests would not be allowed to take place in Taksim Square. Previously, on 29.04.24, interior minister Yerlikaya had stated that Taksim Square would be closed to rallies in order to prevent terrorist organisations from using the site for propaganda.

Following the May Day demonstrations, the Çağdaş Hukukçular Derneği (Contemporary Lawyers' Association, ÇHD) stated that on 03.05.24, a further 47 people were arrested in raids in Istanbul because they had resisted the ban on entering Taksim Square on 01.05.24. In addition, interior Minister Yerlikaya informed that on 03.05.24, a total of 29 people were arrested who had gathered in Sarachane Square on 01.05.24 in order to walk from there to Taksim Square. The detainees had attacked police officers with stones and sticks, he added. According to Yerlikaya, more arrests were made against people who were identified as being involved in the attack on the basis of camera footage and facial recognition systems.

In 2023, the constitutional court had ruled that the closure of Taksim Square for protests was a violation of the right to organise public meetings and demonstrations enshrined in Article 34 of the Constitution. The square had served as a rallying point for the 1 May celebrations until 1977, when at least 34 people were killed in demonstrations. The authorities reopened the square in 2010, but after protests there in 2013, the site was once again closed to demonstrations. The closure remains in place to this day.

In the other major cities, including Ankara and Izmir, the demonstrations on 1 May ended peacefully. In the predominantly Kurdish south-east of Türkiye, thousands gathered in Batman, including the newly elected mayors of the pro-Kurdish DEM party. According to interior minister Yerlikaya, a total of 210 Labour Day events were held in 78 provinces on 1 May, in which 241,000 people took part.²²

Türkiye ranks 158 on the World Press Freedom Index

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) published the World Press Freedom Index on 03.05.24, which is the International Press Freedom Day. Türkiye is ranked 158th out of 180 countries analysed, with a total score of 31.6 points. This puts the country in the category in which the press freedom situation is considered "very serious" according to the RSF. In 2023, Türkiye had been ranked 165th. However, according to RSF, the change is not due to an improvement in press freedom in the country, but rather to regression in other countries. For example, the situation has deteriorated in countries such as Russia, Azerbaijan, and India, which were still ahead of Türkiye last year.

The index is calculated on a scale of 0 to 100, with 100 representing the highest level of press freedom and 0 the lowest. This score is the result of both a quantitative survey of abuses against media professionals and a qualitative analysis by press freedom experts who respond to an RSF questionnaire available in 24 languages. The questionnaire assesses five key indicators, including political context, legal framework, economic context, socio-cultural context, and security.

According to RSF, the one-sided orientation of public broadcasting during the presidential and parliamentary election period and the arrest of dozens of journalists are developments that make Türkiye one of the countries with the biggest setbacks in terms of the political context indicator. The report also mentions other factors such as online censorship, lawsuits against critical media, and financial pressure on critical media professionals and media companies, which are leading to the erosion of media pluralism and press freedom in the country.

Human rights groups reportedly regularly accuse the Turkish government of trying to control the press by imprisoning journalists, closing media companies, monitoring the purchase of media brands by government-affiliated conglomerates, and using regulatory authorities to exert financial pressure.

According to a count by the Expression Interrupted platform, which monitors the situation of media professionals in Türkiye, 32 journalists are currently in prison, among them mainly Kurdish journalists and those working for media outlets allegedly close to the Gülen movement. The Turkish Journalists' Union (TGS) has stated that a total of 69 journalists were arrested in 2023 and 264 were put on trial. 63 were acquitted, while 36 journalists were sentenced to a total of 55 years in prison. The Bianet press agency has stated that since Erdoğan became president in August 2014, a total of 76 journalists have been sentenced to prison or fined for insulting the president under Article 299 of the Turkish penal code.²³

13 May 2024

Arrest orders for 87 suspected Gülen members

On 07.05.24, the Istanbul chief public prosecutor's office issued arrest warrants for 40 people, including 14 young people and teachers. Police arrested 38 of the suspects who are accused of living in student hostels allegedly linked to the Gülen movement and of having contacts with other Gülen members.

The Izmir public prosecutor's office also issued arrest warrants for 31 people, among them former police officers, for alleged links to the Gülen movement. Police arrested 26 of the suspects in eleven provinces.

On 08.05.24, a further 15 people were arrested after the Ankara chief prosecutor's office had issued arrest warrants for 16 suspects, among them active duty and dismissed military officers and former military cadets.²⁴

High school student sentenced for insulting the president

A high school student in Diyarbakır was sentenced to more than seven months in prison on 09.05.24 for allegedly insulting President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. According to media reports, Yusuf S. had allegedly called Erdoğan a dictator on the social network X in December 2022.

The Diyarbakır public prosecutor's office opened an investigation against him and the 2nd Diyarbakır juvenile court closed his case in the first hearing on 09.05.24. During the hearing, the defendant denied having an account on X and contested the evidence presented by the prosecution. The court reduced his sentence from one year to seven months and 23 days and suspended it due to the short period of imprisonment and the defendant's age. The 17-year-old was prosecuted and convicted despite the fact that the general assembly of the court of cassation had ruled in case 2018/62 that calling the president a "thief", "murderer" or "dictator" does not constitute the offence of insulting the president. For example, journalists Orhan Şahin and Başak Günsever, Çorum office workers' union leader Ertuğrul Alper, and CHP member Canan Kaftancıoğlu had all previously been acquitted for calling Erdoğan a dictator.

Insulting the president is a criminal offence under Article 299 of the Turkish penal code. Anyone who insults the president can be sentenced to up to four years in prison; the sentence can be increased if the offence was committed through the mass media. Since Erdoğan's election as president in 2014, more than 160,000 people have been investigated on suspicion of insulting the president, of whom 45,000 have been charged and 13,000 convicted.²⁵

27 May 2024

Opposition politicians sentenced

Media reported on 16.05.24 that a court in Ankara has sentenced the former leader of the pro-Kurdish HDP party, Selahattin Demirtaş, to 42 years in prison for terror propaganda and aiding and abetting the disruption of the unity

and integrity of the state. Demirtaş is accused of riots and deaths related to anti-government protests called by the HDP in 2014. The opposition politician has been in prison on these charges since 2016; his trial began in 2021. In addition to Demirtaş and others, the former HDP co-chair Figen Yüksekdağ was also charged in the trial. She was sentenced to 30 years and three months imprisonment.²⁶

03 June 2024

Arrest of café owner

The Kurdish owner of a café in Diyarbakır was reportedly arrested on 29.05.24 after he announced on the occasion of Kurdish Language Day on 15.05.24 that he would serve his customers exclusively in the Kurdish language in future. The police searched the café. The authorities accuse the café owner of carrying out terrorist propaganda with his plan, and a criminal has been opened. The café owner had previously been criticised on social media. The Diyarbakır bar association has pledged its support to the man and is providing him with legal assistance.²⁷

10 June 2024

40 women murdered in May

Media report that a total of 40 women were murdered in the month of May. In the first five months of 2024, a total of 159 women have been murdered so far and, according to media reports, the perpetrators were all men. In the first five months of 2023, a total of 127 women had been killed.

Of the 40 women murdered in May 2024, 18 women were killed because they wanted to leave their partners. At least 23 women were killed by their husbands or boyfriends and eight women by relatives such as fathers, sons or brothers. Twelve women were murdered outside their home and 28 women were murdered inside their home. Of the total of 42 suspects, 18 have been arrested so far, five have been detained and two suspects managed to escape. According to the platform "We Will Stop Femicide", at least 315 women were murdered by men and 248 women died under suspicious circumstances in 2023 (cf. BN of 04.03.24). Of the 315 murdered women, 39 had reported their attackers to the police or public prosecutor's office prior to their murder and applied for protection from the relevant authorities.²⁸

Pro-Kurdish mayor arrested and replaced by trustee in Hakkari province

Media report that on 02.06.24, police raided the city administration of Hakkari in southeastern Türkiye, resulting in the arrest of mayor Mehmet Sıddık Akış and the subsequent installation of a government-appointed trustee. In the local elections held on 31.03.24, the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Emancipation and Democracy Party (DEM) had won the election in Hakkari and thus had nominated the mayor. The state news agency Anadolu News said that an arrest warrant was issued against mayor Mehmet Sıddık Akış as part of the investigation by the Hakkari chief public prosecutor's office. Akış, who was in Van province at the time, was detained by security forces and taken to Hakkari for trial.

In a written statement, the interior ministry said that a government-appointed trustee would replace mayor Akış. The ministry also accused Akış of holding a high-ranking position in the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), adding that Akış was under investigation for "leading an armed terrorist organisation", "membership of an armed terrorist organisation" and "propaganda for an armed terrorist organisation". On 05.06.24, Akış was sentenced to 19 years and six months in prison for "leading an armed terrorist organisation".

Following the arrest, the DEM party published statements on its social media channels condemning the government's actions as anti-democratic and calling for early elections. On 03.06.24, the governor's office declared on its website that all protests and gatherings in the province would be banned for the next ten days. Despite this, sit-ins were held before the governor's office in Hakkari, which were attended by DEM party deputies and also a delegation from the Republican People's Party (CHP). Vigils and sit-ins also continued to take place in other parts of the country, such as in Istanbul on 08.06.24. On 04.06.24, people gathered in Hakkari to protest against the trustee. Police reportedly intervened with pepper spray and rubber bullets, injuring some of the demonstrators. On 09.06.24, protests were also held in Ankara and Diyarbakır over the appointment of the trustee for Hakkari.

In addition, on 09.06.24 the DEM party called for a rally against the trusteeship to be held on 13.06.24 in the centre of Hakkari.²⁹

17 June 2024

Numbers and situation of prisoners

In the Council of Europe's annual criminal justice statistics for 2022 published on 06.06.24, Türkiye ranks first in Europe with a total of 348,265 prisoners, i.e. 405 inmates per 100,000 inhabitants. In the same period, there were 58,098 people imprisoned in Germany, amounting to 69 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants. The number of prisoners in Türkiye rose by 15 percent compared to 2021. An expert said that these figures can be attributed to the large number of people sentenced under anti-terror laws. The World Organisation Against Torture (Organisation Mondiale contre la Torture, OMCT) says that the imprisonment rate in Türkiye increased by 89.3 percent between 2011 and 2021.

On 01.06.24, the central prisons commission of the Turkish human rights organisation İnsan Hakları Derneği (İHD) published its report on human rights violations in prisons for 2023. İHD reports at least 23,899 human rights violations for that year. İHD states in its report that the justice ministry hardly publishes data on political prisoners, foreign nationals, sick prisoners, deceased prisoners, LGBTIQ people, people with disabilities, young children and female prisoners. The annual report has therefore been compiled on the basis of individual information. The report also refers to the increasing number of prisons in Türkiye. A total of 19 new prisons were opened in 2023 and another twelve are planned for 2024.

The annual report focusses on the treatment of sick prisoners as a human rights violation, as some of them were not released despite being terminally ill. According to İHD, the forensic medical institute makes release decisions based on political bias, refuses to accept hospital reports and does not implement decisions or reports for so-called security reasons, worsening the situation for seriously ill prisoners.

The report also lists around 17,218 human rights violations under the heading of torture, including beatings, threats, disproportionate strip searches and insults. İHD also identified 2,246 violations of the right to correspondence. As of 02.05.24, a total of 13,819 women and 2,983 children were detained in Turkish prisons whose rights to healthcare and privacy were the most frequently violated. Problems in the prisons still include a lack of hygiene and cleaning products as well as access to hot and clean water. Cameras monitoring the women's living areas continue to violate their privacy. According to the report, the cells are monitored 24 hours a day and some toilets and changing rooms are covered by the cameras' visual angles.³⁰

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