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Prime Minister Erna Solberg
Prime Minister's Office
Oslo
Norway

Oslo, 23 November 2016

Re: Deteriorating Media Freedom in Turkey

Dear Ms. Solberg,

On behalf of the International Press Institute (IPI) – a global network of editors, media executives and leading journalists dedicated to protecting media freedom – we write to you to urge your government to take greater action to counter the strangulation of media freedom in Turkey.

As you know, Turkey has seen a number of troubling developments following the July 15 coup attempt that appear unrelated, and in some cases counter, to legitimate efforts to bring those responsible to justice. These include ongoing efforts by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his supporters to use emergency powers granted after the coup to purge any criticism of his rule from the public space.

The latest incidents in this campaign include a 31 October operation against the newspaper *Cumhuriyet*, one of the only remaining independent voices in Turkey's media, in which police detained, among others, the paper's Editor-in-Chief Murat Sabuncu and columnist Kadri Gürsel, a member of IPI's Executive Board and our top representative in Turkey.

The government contends that *Cumhuriyet*, by daring to criticise the regime, lent support to terrorists, i.e., adherents of an outlawed religious sect that the government blames for the coup plot and members of an outlawed Kurdish separatist group with which the government has been locked in a bloody, three-decade-long conflict in Turkey's southeast.

The operation against *Cumhuriyet* came 48 hours after the government used emergency powers granted after the coup attempt to silence 15 pro-Kurdish media outlets for alleged terrorism ties. Like *Cumhuriyet*, the pro-Kurdish media outlets had represented some of the last independent voices in Turkey. Moreover, they had played a vital role in documenting grave human rights violations amid anti-terror operations in south-eastern Turkey.

These incidents are hardly anomalous and highlight the manner in which a pattern of repression that began years ago has intensified since the coup attempt.

Turkey made progress toward meeting its human rights commitments in the early years of Erdoğan's reign. But in recent years Erdoğan has utilised a toxic, albeit effective, combination of legal, regulatory and economic pressure to weaken checks and balances, erode respect for human rights and stifle criticism.

This abuse of authority only worsened in 2016. Since July, the government has shuttered more than 160 media outlets. Some 140 journalists are behind bars, more than in any other nation and many with no demonstrable connection to the coup attempt or its plotters, or to Kurdish militants. Most were detained on little to no real evidence, have been deprived of timely access to attorneys and hold little faith that they will receive a fair trial.

Recent annual EU enlargement reports routinely have noted continuing threats to media freedom in Turkey. But a report released 9 November, highlighted "serious backsliding in the past year in the area of freedom of expression". Among other points, it severely criticised Turkey's government for "[s]elective and arbitrary application of the law, especially of the provisions on national security and the fight against terrorism".



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Media freedom – in contributing to government accountability, and to an open, transparent and more equal society – is essential for stability. But as respect for democracy and human rights declines in Turkey, and as independent voices are silenced and only pro-government voices are heard, instability will grow and it will spread beyond Turkey's borders.

This directly threatens global stability as well. As recent years have shown, the world requires Turkey's cooperation to address serious challenges, including the flow of migrants to Europe and the fight against radical militants. Overlooking Turkey's leaders' authoritarianism in exchange for their support now will only heighten those challenges in the future, with potentially catastrophic results for Turkey and the broader world.

We therefore urge your government to intervene and make greater efforts to restore respect for democracy and human rights in Turkey. This includes pressing the Erdoğan regime not only to immediately free all journalists facing politically motivated criminal cases and to drop all charges against them – particularly in the case of Mr. Gürsel, Mr. Sabuncu and their Cumhuriyet colleagues – but also to end its cynical and undemocratic exploitation of the state of emergency to settle old scores, consolidate power and crush dissent.

To that end, and given IPI's over-65 years of expertise on media freedom issues, we would be happy to meet with you to provide any further information on this matter.

Yours very truly,

Ole Kristian Bjellaanes,
IPI Executive Board Member
Chair, IPI National Committee in Norway
Managing Editor, Norwegian News Agency

Cc: Mr. Børge Brende, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Norway
Ms. Elisabeth Vik Aspaker, Minister of EEA and EU Affairs of Norway