

## **We stand united against efforts to destroy civil society**

In response to the absurd allegations levelled against Osman Kavala and Yiğit Aksakoğlu, who are both imprisoned pending trial, as well as 14 other civil society figures, all of whom are accused of “attempting to overthrow the government”, we, the undersigned human rights organizations, call for the escalating crackdown on and criminalization of civil society to end.

For the last five days, alleged details of an indictment against these 16 civil society actors have been leaked through the mainstream media in Turkey in a coordinated campaign of misinformation. According to purported leaks from the indictment, which has yet to be seen by lawyers representing the accused, the allegations focus on the 2013 Gezi Park protests, an overwhelmingly peaceful protest movement that was suppressed by the government amidst widespread police violence.

A much larger group of civil society figures continue to be investigated under the auspices of the same investigation. Those under investigation and those facing indictment are neither responsible for the Gezi Park protests, which ought to be considered as a matter of freedom of expression, nor for any crimes. The court should reject any indictment based on absurd conspiracies and which lack any meaningful evidence, and Osman Kavala and Yiğit Aksakoğlu, who have been imprisoned for 16 and 3 months respectively, should be immediately released.

This latest assault on civil society comes at a time when human rights defenders and other civil society activists increasingly face detention, prosecution and imprisonment simply for exposing human rights violations and for demanding truth, justice and means of redress.

The seventh hearing of the “Büyükkada” trial of 11 human rights defenders will be held next month. No evidence has been presented in this trial to substantiate the trumped-up charges of terrorism, which are based solely on the human rights activism of the accused.

Today, human rights defenders Şebnem Korur Fincancı, Erol Önderoğlu and Ahmet Nesin are in court accused of producing ‘terrorist propaganda’ by participating in a solidarity action with the now closed *Özgür Gündem* newspaper. Journalists who worked for *Özgür Gündem* are also facing a campaign of judicial harassment. Two months ago, Şebnem Korur Fincancı was convicted of producing ‘terrorist propaganda’ and sentenced to two and a half years in prison for signing the ‘Peace Petition’. This conviction is pending an appeal at a regional appeals court. However, in previous rulings these appeals courts have wholly failed to prove themselves to be independent of the government. Human rights defender Eren Keskin, who acted as co-editor-in-chief of *Özgür Gündem* in an act of solidarity with the newspaper, is also being tried in over 100 cases. Meanwhile, 129 individuals from Academics for Peace have been sentenced to imprisonment. 25 of these individuals will be imprisoned if the regional appeals court upholds their convictions. Their appeals are ongoing.

Both the solidarity with *Özgür Gündem* and Academics for Peace trials are among those being used by the government to suppress and silence hundreds of civil society

activists in Turkey. This situation has emerged just as the courts have been handing down ever harsher prison sentences for similar acts of legitimate and peaceful dissent.

International treaties to which Turkey is a state party place a special emphasis on the important role played by human rights defenders, civil society and a free press in ensuring respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. The effective protection of the freedom, security, dignity and physical and psychological integrity of human rights defenders is also a precondition for the right to defend human rights.

International law also insists that the fundamental responsibility for protecting human rights defenders belongs to the state. The state is ultimately responsible for protecting all rights enjoyed by human rights defenders: from the rights to freedom of thought and expression to the rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly.

We, the undersigned organizations, stand united against these efforts to destroy independent civil society in Turkey, call for an end to the orchestrated campaign of intimidation and judicial harassment of civil society activists in Turkey and once again remind the authorities of their obligations to protect human rights defenders under international law.

Civil Rights Defenders

Association for Monitoring Equal Rights (Eşit Haklar İçin İzleme Derneği)

Memory Centre (Hakikat Adalet Hafıza Merkezi)

The Rights Initiative (Hak İnisiyatifi Derneği)

Human Right Association (İnsan Hakları Derneği)

Human Rights Agenda Association (İnsan Hakları Gündemi Derneği)

Reporters Without Borders (Sınır Tanımayan Gazeteciler)

Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (Türkiye İnsan Hakları Vakfı)

Citizens' Assembly Turkey (Yurttaşlık Derneği)

Amnesty International (Uluslararası Af Örgütü)