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## 22 | Turkey: censorship past and present

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### *Historical background*

*The religious roots of music censorship* Music censorship in our past finds its roots in Islam. It is believed that these words were uttered by the Prophet Mouhammad: 'A woman who lets her melodic voice be heard by a man must be excommunicated.'

This edict has been the reason for forbidding female voices from being heard through the centuries. Even today, choirs singing religious music in ceremonies consist of men only. It is also argued that 'musical instruments' are included in that sentence too. But this interpretation is not widely accepted in Turkey. Both in contemporary Ottoman music – based on the music of Byzantium- and military or folk music, many instruments are used.

*The Ottoman Empire* The Ottoman Empire (1300–1922) was a multinational, multi-cultural union. Every ethnic group could sing its own songs in its own language, in any part of the empire. From time to time songs were banned for political reasons, for example revolutionary Alawia songs, and much more in the time of the 'Red Sultan', Abdulhamid II (1876–1909), as his administration censored almost everything.

Only the ban on female voices was maintained, together with the social ban on female participation in any branch of the arts. Even during the first two decades of the twentieth century, the stage was open only to women of Christian minorities – Greeks, Armenians, etc. Some Turkish women could step on to the stage and act and sing, but only using a pseudonym and by pretending they were non-Muslims.

### *After the republic*

*One nation, one music* The Ottoman Empire lost most of its territory in the First World War. Even most of Anatolia was occupied by the Allies, including the capital of the empire, Istanbul. But in 1919 a resistance movement led by General Mustafa Kemal (later Atatürk) started, and after an independence war of three years, Greek armies had to leave Turkey. In July 1923 the new Turkish state was recognized by the Lausanne Treaty. On 23 October 1923 the new Turkish state was declared a republic.

Atatürk's ideal was to build up one 'nation' from the ashes of the empire. The new policies aiming towards a modern society, such as changing the alphabet, the calendar and measures, the acceptance of a new civil law, equal rights for women, improving education – simply 'creating the new citizen' – were formulated in the following years. The basic philosophy was 'One nation, one language, one history, one culture'. (The oppression of Kurds and other minorities, which still continues, is based on this philosophy.)

The first radio stations were established in Istanbul and Ankara in 1925. At this time the first ban was introduced on contemporary Ottoman music and its extension, 'A la Turca' music, which is listened to in Istanbul and other big cities. Although Atatürk himself loved to listen to this 'modal' music, he thought that only Western harmonic music should be transmitted, so that the musical tastes of the people could be changed.

Naturally, another ban was introduced for 'Rebetiko', the music created by Anatolian Greeks. Over 1.5 million of them were 'exchanged' with Turks living in Greece after 1922. Since they were being expelled, their music should go with them. (It is another tragedy that this music was also rejected in Greece, on the grounds that it was 'not pure Hellenic'. It was banned many times, latterly in 1967 in the days of the Colonels' junta.)

*Assimilation of 'others'* Ankara Radio station – the principal station – has conducted musical research throughout Anatolia. On the one hand, this has saved many folkloric values from being lost. But on the other it has ruined much else, by trying to amalgamate everything in 'one form'. Turkish lyrics were written for many Kurdish, Armenian and Greek songs and all were performed by a 'One type' orchestra, consisting of *saz*'es' and choir, called *Yurttan Sesler Korosu*.

Even today, very few people know that 'Sari Gelin' is an Armenian folk song; similarly 'Yaylalar' (one of the favorite songs of Turkish fascists) is also a Kurdish folk song.

Although American, French, German, Italian and Spanish songs were always freely broadcast, we cannot say the same for Russian songs. Starting with the Cold War period, almost everything concerning Russia and the Soviet Union has been taboo. The story is told of a police officer who tried to arrest an intellectual because he saw the Larousse in his library, thinking that it was something from Russia. (In Turkish, 'Russia' is pronounced 'Roussia'.)

Throughout the period of the state monopoly on broadcasts (1925–2000) political censorship and self-censorship always existed, changing only its form or framework. Generally we can say that what came from the West was good and what came from East was bad. Russian and Greek were almost always

dangerous. Kurdish was totally denied –not just the music, but also the Kurdish language, which officially just did not exist.

*The Music Auditing Commission at TRT (Turkish Radio Television)* Rock 'n' roll music was very popular among the young generation towards the end of the 1950s. Musical groups, trying to imitate American or English models, started to appear in schools. After a short period of 'imitation', these young musicians tried to combine folkloric themes, rhythms and instruments with those coming from the West. This became Turkish pop music.

Young DJs at TRT loved this new music and started transmitting it unadulterated in their programmes. This was too much for the music authorities at TRT. For them, these new sallies into music were very dangerous, because these 'children' had no music education and there was the danger that they would 'harm listeners. Music auditing commissions were established. All new songs had to be vetted by them, and any song not on the list of 'permitted songs' could not be transmitted by any radio or TV programme.

Later, a single and central commission was set up in Ankara. This commission's decisions were so strict that TRT programme producers and DJs could hardly find enough material to fill their broadcasts. For this reason they collaborated when musicians started a boycott against the TRT in 1972.

The censorship was double edged. While some members of the commission controlled the lyrics, others monitored the music. You could not use phrases reminiscent of Greek themes. You could not use the *saz* and piano together. You could never use bouzouki, balalaika or *cümbüs*. They were totally forbidden.

Between 1975 and 1980, the Supreme Court heard four cases against the TRT's decisions and the artists won each time. Bans on the songs entitled 'Arkadas', 'Bir Gün Gelecek', 'Ninni' and 'Insaniz Biz' were rescinded. But what happened then? The songs were transmitted only once by one of the smallest TRT radio stations and an official letter was sent to the court, giving the transmission date and time. That was all! A verbal – and secret – order was given to department chiefs never to play the songs again.

Then came the days of the 1980 military junta. All the legislation – including the constitution – was changed. My ex-wife Melike Demirag (a famous singer and film actress) and I had to live in exile for twelve years, and our citizenship was cancelled. One day, we saw a photo in a Turkish journal: 'Terrorists captured,' ran the caption. Some young people were shown standing beside a table piled with books; our LPs were also lying on the table. Evidence of crime!

*Today*

*Self-censorship and the media* Some groups and singers, such as Grup Yorum, Kizilirmak, Koma Amed, Koma Denge Jiyane, Koma Asmin, Shivan, Ciwan Xeco, Ferhat Tunç, Suavi and Ahmet Kaya - who died in exile - are automatically *non grata* for private radio and TV stations, for they know that the state does not like them. It is almost the same with the press. Many journals and TV and radio stations belong to just a few bosses. The editors and programmers know what *not* to do, so direct censorship is not necessary at all.

Another factor is RTÜK (Supreme Institution for Radio-TV), which is authorized to ban radio or TV transmissions temporarily -for a few days, a few months, a year - or for ever. The sentences meted out by this institution have spelled the end for many small radio or TV stations in Turkey.

*Auditing commissions of the Ministry of Culture on the phonogram industry* These bodies oversee the open form of censorship of CDs and other audio and video media. The producers are obliged to acquire a general 'producers' licence' and then a 'permission document' for each production from the Ministry of Culture. The 'auditing committee' is established by the ministry and consists of a total of seven members. The ministry appoints the president. Three members are appointed by the State Security Council (military), the ministry of the interior (police), and ministry of National Education. Two members are sent by organizations representing cinema and musical copyright owners and a musician is appointed by the Minister of Culture. Simply put, five out of the seven members are appointed by the state. The producer may watch the meeting as an observer, but has no right to speak or vote.

In practice, the censorship works only against Kurdish and minority cultures and left-wing protest songs. A signed document is demanded from the producer, declaring that there is nothing in the production contradicting the 'Rules of Audition'; and also accepting complete legal responsibility for the lyrics, if they are in a language other than Turkish.

Reading this, you may think that there is no outright ban on any language. Yes, some music cassettes in Kurdish are produced and you may find them in the market. But you can never be sure that the governor of a particular province or even district will not ban the cassette in his region.

It is the same with concerts. Often groups travel over a thousand kilometres to the South-east of the country and hear that the concert has been forbidden by the governor at the last moment. The reason? In one word: security.

As an example of the auditing commission's activities, in June 2002 KALAN Music producer Hasan Saltık's licence was cancelled by the ministry, owing

to a report from the auditing commission about a cassette entitled *Gününü umuda ayarla*, released in 1993. But as a result of strong protests and media coverage, with reminders that Hasan Saltık was also the producer of Prime Minister Ecevit's poetry cassette, his licence was immediately reinstated.

Now KALAN Music and Hasan Saltık are in trouble again for another production. A cassette by the group Yorum entitled *FEDA* was banned and Saltık invited to pay a fine of 2,800,000,000 Turkish lira (\$US1,750); otherwise a case would be opened against him. He refused to pay, insisting that he did not accept that a crime had been committed.

*Self-censorship in life as a result of oppression* Newspapers report daily that the Gendarmerie have taken people into custody during a wedding fest somewhere in the South-east because they were singing songs in Kurdish.

This is still the case even though Parliament has amended the constitution and former laws and officials repeatedly declare that Kurdish is not forbidden. Even if there is no legal or official ban, the practice continues and people have to censor themselves.

*Cases against songs* A Kurdish group – Koma Aşiti – was sentenced to three years and nine months in prison by the Supreme Court of Appeal. Another case concerns Koma Asmin, a group from the Mesopotamian Cultural Centre, consisting of eleven young women. On 15 August 2002, they were tried at the Istanbul State Security Court for a song they sang at the final concert of the Diyarbakir Cultural Festival on 2 June. The song, entitled *Herne Pesh* (Forward), is approximately sixty years old, comes from southern Kurdistan, and has nothing to do with the PKK and Turkey.

Reports consist only of words and statistics. I want to close with the story of their concert and custody as related to me by one member of the group, Ms Serap Sönmez:

### *Herne Pesh (Forward)*

The Diyarbakir Festival of Culture and Arts is the biggest in the region. This year the Mesopotamian Cultural Centre participated at the festival with the music group 'Koma Asmin' of eleven young women. I am one of them.

It was the last day of the festival. Over fifteen thousand people filled the area near the ancient city walls. They had been there since early morning, waiting under the sun. Police were trying to provoke them with insulting words, asking 'Come on, what will you do now?', toying with people's patience.

Everybody was excited. We would be the last and most eagerly awaited group on stage. All went well, and after fifteen songs we came to the last one,

*Herne Pesh* (Forward). This is a very old, traditional song. We think that it becomes women: 'You may join me, or you may stay if you like. But I am going forward.'

We started singing. Not just the eleven of us, but fifteen thousand throats and hearts joined in. This was the finale everybody was waiting to hear, such euphoria ...

There seemed to be trouble below the stage. People were refusing to leave, believing that the police would take us away after they had left.

Closing our ears to the insults of the police on both sides, we moved off. But we did not get far. Our minibus was stopped as soon as we left the square. Police ordered those who were not group members to get off. We were being taken to the police station surrounded by insults, no longer whispered but shouted.

After the police station they took us to the hospital. A health report had to be filed in accordance with CMUK (the Criminal Courts' Procedural Law). In the police bus they play Mehter (Ottoman military music) as loud as possible, as if in response to *Herne Pesh*.

At the Anti-Terror Centre they laid us down beside a wall. But then something unexpected happened. We heard a voice saying: 'Turn your faces here, children, please relax.'

Who was this? He introduced himself: the chief of the Anti-terror department had come to the rescue just in time. The chief said that the treatment we had received was absolutely a mistake. We would not be taken to the custody cells but would be their guests tonight, just to give our statements. He also introduced the police officers to whom we might express our needs and added that we could tell him the next morning if we had any complaints. There was only one policewoman there. He said: 'No! One female policeperson alone cannot take care of all of you.' Two more soon came.

We were kept there until the next morning, sitting on chairs but unable to speak amongst ourselves, answering their endless questions until eight o'clock in the morning. When the new day began, all the police officers came to their offices after a nice sleep and full of energy. The insults resumed from the point where they had left off the evening before.

I couldn't help asking myself: 'What is the reason for this much anger and hatred?'

It was nearly noon when the process of taking our fingerprints and photographs and asking us very same questions over and over was completed. We should now be taken to court so that we could be remanded in custody or set free by the judge.

But today was the moment everybody had been waiting for for months. The





**13 The Kurdish group Koma Asmin were taken to a police station after a successful concert and interrogated by the anti-terror department.**

Turkish national football team was playing its first game in the World Cup, against Brazil. The whole country, including police, prosecutor and judge, was glued to the TV screen. We can only hear the reactions of the policemen watching the game. And all of a sudden, GOOOOOOAL! Turkey 1, Brazil 0.

We were totally forgotten, and we made jokes among ourselves. Who knows? Maybe they will let us go, to honour the goal ... It was only the beginning of the game, but everybody would be so happy if Turkey won. We hoped they didn't lose, otherwise we might have to pay for it.

Then a female police officer asked us: 'Why don't you feel happy? Why don't you sing a song of happiness?'. Then came the department chief. After asking us whether everything was OK, he turned to the policewoman and asked her whether or not we were happy about the game. The answer was negative. We had to listen to the chief's long and complicated explanation of how people who have lost their national feeling are almost dead, finished! Then came the surprise: they could bring us a monitor if we wanted to watch the game.

Well, this was a different, strange type of oppression which one could face only once in four years: a Kurdish female music group oppressed by Turkish national football.

'Thanks a lot,' we said, 'but we do not care too much for football.'

But we could not convince them. The chief repeated his offer at least three times but did not succeed in gaining our sympathy for the sport. Then came half-time. And after that Brazil scored two goals and the subject was closed.

One of the policewomen gazed at us constantly with disgusted looks. She was dark and looked like us, and asked us questions all the time: how old were we, where were we from, whose voice was the most beautiful, etc. We were pretending to be asleep, just to avoid her endless interrogation. But she answered her own questions. ‘Of course you won’t answer. Because you’re jealous of each other. You are women too, aren’t you?’

Finally she asked the question she had been leading up to: ‘Guess where I come from?’

We offered the names of some Kurdish cities, but none of us could guess how deeply she could hurt us. ‘I am from Urfa, I am Kurdish too. But I am not like you. I can sing the national hymn.’ And she kept on about separatism and betrayal. ‘I am a police officer. Nobody hindered me. My father is a colonel. He was not hindered either. Everybody’s equal in this country.’

Then she wanted to prove that she could sing in Kurdish as well and started a song, making a lot of mistakes and mixing up the words. She was trying to sing *Bingol Shewiti*, but no doubt she did not know the meaning of the words: ‘*wa qomando çi imane!* ... (How cruel is this commander!)’.

She was Kurdish, so were we, She was a woman, so were we. What we felt was a deep sorrow for her.

Then came the prosecutor and the judge, and we were released to be tried later.

But our song did not come to an end. People were waiting for our release at the door.

Yes, the song will continue ...

Serap Sönmez, musician, Koma Asmin, Mesopotamian Cultural Centre, Istanbul

### Note

<sup>1</sup> A stringed instrument made of wood with a long fingerboard. It is a common instrument among Turks and Kurds. The bouzouki is a corrupt version adapted to twelve tones, used by Anatolian Greeks.