17–25 December 2013 and Its Aftermath

How Did the 17–25 December Investigations Affect Civil Society in

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The corruption and bribery investigations of 17 and 25 December: a brief account

Our purpose here is to examine the different ways in which the December investigations affected Türkiye. Readers can find detailed accounts of the operations in publicly available sources. We begin with a brief account before examining their wider impact across different areas of public life.

On the morning of 17 December 2013, police launched a major operation as part of a confidential investigation led by prosecutors at the Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor's Office. Those taken into custody included the sons of Interior Minister Muammer Güler, Economy Minister Zafer Çağlayan and Environment Minister Erdoğan Bayraktar, as well as business figures including Reza Zarrab, public officials and the general manager of Halkbank. The allegations centred on money laundering, bribery, abuse of office and smuggling.

Soon afterwards, the press published images of large sums of cash and money-counting machines reportedly found during searches of suspects' homes. In the days that followed, recordings purporting to capture conversations between politicians and business figures began circulating online. Under mounting pressure, three ministers named in connection with the operation resigned: Interior Minister Muammer Güler, Economy Minister Zafer Çağlayan and Environment and Urbanisation Minister Erdoğan Bayraktar. EU Affairs Minister Egemen Bağış lost his post in a cabinet reshuffle.

On 25 December, another prosecutor sought to launch a second wave of operations. This time the targets included businesspeople who had won major infrastructure contracts, as well as Bilal Erdoğan, son of the then prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The police did not carry out the prosecutor's instructions to detain suspects and conduct searches. The prosecutor distributed a statement outside the courthouse saying that his work had been obstructed. He was subsequently taken off the case.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) government described the events as "a coup and conspiracy against the elected government and the country's economy, orchestrated by groups within the judiciary and the police". The government declared that an anti-government group had infiltrated the police and the judiciary and carried out the operations. Yet the AKP government had itself appointed all the police officers who conducted the investigation. The spurious coup narrative overshadowed allegations that

implicated ministers and even members of the prime minister's own family. If this was an attempted coup, were the AKP figures named in the corruption allegations aiding and abetting it too?

The government moved swiftly against the police and judicial officials conducting the operations. Thousands of police chiefs and officers were reassigned across Türkiye, well beyond Istanbul, where the investigation was taking place. Key prosecutors were removed from their posts. In 2014, newly appointed prosecutors took over the files. Decisions not to prosecute ultimately brought both the 17 December and the 25 December investigations to a close. Following a parliamentary inquiry, the Grand National Assembly voted on 20 January 2015 against referring the four former ministers to the Constitutional Court sitting as the Supreme Criminal Tribunal.

The investigations of 17 and 25 December thus marked a profound turning point in Türkiye's political history and in the structure of the state.

The High Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK) dismissed from the profession the lead prosecutors who had conducted the investigations and the judges who had blocked decisions not to prosecute. Following the dismissals, arrest orders were issued for judicial officials involved in the investigations on charges of "attempting to overthrow the constitutional order", "membership of a terrorist organisation" and "forgery of documents".

During this period, prosecutors left the country and later sought asylum in European countries. Some judges and prosecutors involved in the investigations who were unable to leave were arrested, tried and sentenced to aggravated life imprisonment or lengthy prison terms.

Senior officers in the Istanbul police who had directed the police operations were initially removed from their posts and reassigned to various provinces in Anatolia. Shortly afterwards, these officers were taken into custody and remanded in pretrial detention in connection with the "VIP Wiretapping" and "17–25 December" investigations.

In its first-instance judgment of 24 December 2018 in the 25 December case, the trial court sentenced a number of police chiefs and senior officers, including Yakub Saygılı, former head of the Financial Crimes Branch, to aggravated life imprisonment for "attempting to overthrow the Government of the Republic of Türkiye or to prevent it from carrying out its duties".

In subsequent proceedings in the United States, Reza Zarrab admitted paying bribes to officials and working with Turkish officials to circumvent the international economic embargo on Iran. Despite this, judicial and police officials who worked on the December investigations continue to face accusations and remain in prison.

The transformation of civil society in Türkiye and democratic backsliding after December 2013

In democratic theory, civil society organisations (CSOs) occupy the space between the individual and the state. They scrutinise those in power, organise around public concerns, bring those concerns into public debate and sustain political pluralism. Independence from the state and from those who govern is therefore fundamental to civil society. The changes in Türkiye's civic sphere, particularly since the December 2013 investigations, show how steadily that autonomy has eroded.

The corruption and bribery investigations that came to public attention on 17 and 25 December 2013 marked a rupture that extended beyond law enforcement and the judiciary. They also marked a change in how the government understood its control over the state and society. Thereafter, those in power began to describe any criticism directed at them as a threat, an attempt to impose political tutelage, foreign interference or an uprising against the will of the nation. This way of thinking carried over directly into the government's dealings with civil society.

During this period, organisations that maintained, or sought to maintain, an independent or critical stance despite the pressures faced various efforts to discredit them, constrain them or render them ineffective. Meanwhile, organisations with ideological, economic or personnel ties to the government received material support and public endorsement.

The contrast between two business associations, TÜSİAD and MÜSİAD, illustrates the point. TÜSİAD has at times spoken publicly about the rule of law, democracy and institutional autonomy. The promotion of MÜSİAD, whose public positions are more supportive of the government, suggests a preference for cultivating a loyal counterweight to TÜSİAD at the expense of pluralism. Backed by the full resources of the government, MÜSİAD has positioned itself as TÜSİAD's rival, although a business association would ordinarily be expected to act independently of political parties. Its alignment goes so far that members often refer to it among themselves as the "Muslim Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association", playing on its actual name, the "Independent Industrialists' and Businessmen's

Association" (Müstakil Sanayici ve İşadamları Derneği). The influence its members derive from the Muslim conservative AKP government has emboldened their efforts to monopolise their field.

MÜSİAD has acted like an arm of the government, choosing to conceal, distort or disregard economic indicators rather than scrutinise them from the business community's perspective. The experience of TÜSİAD's leaders offers a revealing comparison. On 19 February 2025, police escorted its then president, Orhan Turan, and the chair of its High Advisory Council, Mehmet Arif Ömer Aras, to the courthouse to give statements to prosecutors about critical speeches they had delivered at the association's general assembly on 13 February. TÜSİAD had spoken out about the country's problems under successive governments, regardless of who held office. This was the first time in its 54-year history that two senior executives had faced such treatment. All they had done was what their predecessors had long done: speak critically about judicial proceedings, the rule of law, the economy and democracy. In March 2026, the court set a prison term of one year, three months and eighteen days for each man for publicly disseminating misleading information, and deferred pronouncement of the judgment.

The prosecution's investigation into TÜSİAD's leadership needs to be read alongside the political response. The justice minister and AKP spokespeople described the criticisms as "an attempt to steer the judiciary and politics and to undermine the rule of law". Erdoğan called them "interference" and said TÜSİAD should "know its place". Taken together, these reactions show how little room civil society now has to criticise the authorities in Türkiye and how far its very existence is under threat.

What happened to the country's largest organisation representing business interests raised serious concerns about economic stability, confidence and predictability. The treatment meted out to such a large and powerful association also served as a warning to every other CSO. This episode alone shows how little criticism the government will tolerate in its dealings with civil society.

After December 2013, the creation of new pro-government organisations was only part of the change. It also became increasingly common to install people close to the government in the leadership of existing organisations, distribute public resources selectively and make access to state-linked funding depend on loyalty. These practices weakened the voluntary character of civil society and its ability to represent the public. Organisations that might have scrutinised public policy became quasi-official bodies that lent legitimacy to the government's account of its

actions. This period saw the emergence of what can properly be called PARALLEL CSOs: organisations working to keep the AKP in power and receiving public funds to do so.

Parallel CSOs are crucial to understanding how relations between civil society and government in Türkiye have changed and deteriorated. The substantial resources channelled through municipalities and provincial governors' offices to TÜGVA, TÜRGEV, the Ensar Foundation and other organisations close to the AKP need to be understood in the context of a deliberate and sustained political strategy. Treating each grant as an isolated decision obscures that pattern.

Directing public resources to parallel organisations runs counter to the rationale of civil society. Civil society organisations are generally understood to be voluntary bodies rooted in the communities they serve and able to operate independently of state resources.

AKP-run municipalities and provincial governors' offices are public bodies with a duty to serve every section of society. When they regularly channel substantial resources to organisations of a particular ideological persuasion, they undermine the competition among civic organisations that serves the public interest. Such transfers turn the recipients into state-backed, quasi-public bodies and strip them of their independence as civic actors.

International scholarship describes practices of this kind, seen during the AKP's time in office, as the cultivation of a loyalist civil society. It also uses the term "government-organised non-governmental organisations" (GONGOs) for ostensibly independent organisations established or run by the state.

Under these arrangements, critical and independent organisations come under pressure, while organisations close to the government grow with public funding. The government then uses them to build public legitimacy for its own policies.

The concentration of TÜRGEV and similar bodies on youth, education and the teaching of values is directly connected to a long-term goal: perpetuating an ideology and cultivating the people who will carry it forward. Parallel CSOs have been among the most important milestones in Türkiye's democratic backsliding and the construction of one-man rule.

The substantial public resources channelled to TÜRGEV and similar organisations have become an important part of the democratic backsliding that accelerated after December 2013 and became entrenched after 15 July 2016. In the process,

civil society has lost its role as a check on those in power and become an extension of their ideology and influence in society.

This is at odds with a basic feature of democracy. Elections are only one of its elements. A pluralistic, autonomous civic sphere in which criticism is possible is just as essential.

In sum, the large donations channelled through municipalities and provincial governors' offices to TÜRGEV and similar pro-AKP organisations cannot be explained as incidental or well-intentioned social assistance. They point to a government policy of creating a strong, loyal civic sector that it can control. This policy politicises civil society, impairs its ability to function and weakens democratic checks and balances.

Routing resources through municipalities, special provincial administrations, governors' offices or publicly owned companies, rather than directly through the central budget, serves to diffuse political responsibility and make the transfers less visible. It makes legal scrutiny harder and allows political choices to be justified in the language of charity and social assistance.

The AKP government attaches little importance to the serious questions this raises about equality and impartiality in the use of public resources. For those in power, the ends justify the means.

The policy extends beyond financial support. Organisations close to the AKP also:

receive invitations to official ceremonies,

present government policies as the views of civil society,

are given visibility in the media, and

are helped to secure a monopoly in their respective fields.

This allows the government to present its own policies as public demands while pushing critical voices to the margins.

Parallel, pro-government organisations built up with public resources gain an unfair advantage over independent organisations working in the same field. They crowd out groups that depend on volunteers and donations to survive. This eliminates competition, diversity and fair representation within civil society, narrowing the field until only one perspective and one voice can be heard.

Examples of parallel, pro-government organisations

TÜRGEV (Service for Youth and Education Foundation of Türkiye). The foundation was established in 1996 under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then mayor of Istanbul. At the time of writing, Fatmanur Altun chaired the foundation and Erdoğan's daughter, Esra Albayrak, sat on its board. Numerous AKP politicians and people with family connections to them play active roles in the foundation. Even Euronews has noted that the foundation is publicly described as close to the Erdoğan family. In Türkiye after December 2013, it is plain how little room there is for another foundation to survive in the same field as one close to the Erdoğan family.

TÜGVA (Türkiye Youth Foundation). This foundation for young people and students was established in 2014. The timing deserves attention: it was founded shortly after the investigations of 17 and 25 December 2013. Its president is İbrahim Beşinci. President Erdoğan's son Bilal Erdoğan sits on its High Advisory Council and is publicly associated with the foundation. On visits to cities around the country, Bilal Erdoğan is received with official honours and sometimes poses for photographs seated at provincial governors' desks.

TÜGVA is structured to organise young people ideologically along the AKP's conservative lines.

The Ensar Foundation. This education foundation provides students with accommodation and places in dormitories. Allegations of serious misconduct, including sexual abuse, have surfaced at some of its branches. A letter stipulating that US$7.925 million of Başkentgaz's US$8 million donation to the Turkish Red Crescent should be transferred to the Ensar Foundation to build a student residence sparked fierce political controversy. The foundation's institutional ties to the AKP and its influence in politics and education have allowed it to dominate this field. It has even begun to go so far as to determine curricula and place teachers in classrooms in schools under the Ministry of National Education. The foundation's invitations to all AKP events and to public–private protocol ceremonies make the pressure on other organisations more visible.

In this context, organisations such as TÜRGEV, TÜGVA and the Ensar Foundation have established themselves in areas of civic life aligned with those in power, weakening critical voices. They compete with liberal and independent youth and student associations. They also target conservative associations and foundations

that do not pledge unconditional allegiance to the government. They will not countenance sharing public resources with them.

According to a parliamentary question submitted by members of the Republican People's Party (CHP):

Between 2014 and 2018, AKP-run municipalities, foremost among them the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, and public institutions reportedly channelled resources worth nearly half a billion Turkish lira to TÜGVA, TÜRGEV, Ensar and similar foundations. The total included allocations of land and buildings, support for renovations and other financial resources.

The parliamentary question indicates that donations took the form of transfers in kind, including land and buildings, as well as cash.

Taking into account the resources channelled through international funds alongside domestic public resources gives a clearer picture of the scale of government support for loyalist organisations within civil society.

The Turken Foundation. TÜRGEV and the Ensar Foundation also established the Turken Foundation in the United States in 2014 to support international students and education. Erdoğan's daughter Esra Albayrak is among its board members. Alongside its student housing and scholarship programmes, international lobbying and donations channelled through Turken have also been the subject of political controversy.

The foundation seeks to build social networks aligned with the AKP abroad as well as within Türkiye.

Scholars frequently describe the process that accelerated after December 2013 in terms of democratic backsliding or a turn towards competitive authoritarianism. On this account, democracy retains its formal institutions even as its substance and practical reach diminish. Civil society loses its independence and is reduced to a carefully controlled public showcase. The criminalisation of critical organisations, their intimidation through inspections and investigations, and accusations that they are unpatriotic are the ways in which civil society experiences that backsliding.

The transformation of civil society in Türkiye after 17 and 25 December 2013 reflects both institutional change and a deeper rupture in the understanding of democracy itself. As civil society has lost ground as a sphere in which people can scrutinise those in power and represent their communities independently,

democratic pluralism has weakened and public debate has narrowed towards a single voice. The gap between the role civil society is understood to play and the position it actually occupies in Türkiye continues to widen.