

URGENT ACTION

FREE AUTHOR AHMET ALTAN

On 12 November, renowned Turkish author and former newspaper editor, Ahmet Altan, was detained after a court overturned the decision taken on 4 November to release him after three years in detention. Ahmet Altan is a prisoner of conscience and must be immediately and unconditionally released.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Mr Abdülhamit Gül
Minister of Justice
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Dear Minister,

*I am writing to you regarding the re-arrest of novelist **Ahmet Altan**, on 12 November, eight days after he was released from over three years of prison detention.*

Ahmet Altan was first detained and remanded in prison in September 2016. He was prosecuted for his alleged support of the 2016 attempted coup to overthrow the government. His prosecution was solely based on his journalistic work, which was critical of the government, and contacts with alleged followers of the religious cleric, Fethullah Gülen – whom the government holds responsible for the coup attempt.

In February 2018, Ahmet Altan was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole for “attempting to overthrow the constitutional order”, despite an alarming lack of evidence of any internationally recognisable crime. Ahmet Altan appealed the verdict, and on 5 July 2019 the Supreme Court of Appeals decided to overturn his conviction and ordered a re-trial. On 4 November, the Istanbul Heavy Penal Court No. 26 convicted Ahmet Altan and sentenced him to 10-and-a-half years in prison, on the basis of the same evidence that had seen him convicted at the first trial – his writing and comments that were critical of the government. The court ruled that he be released pending his appeal, with an international travel ban.

The prosecutor appealed the court’s decision to release Ahmet Altan, arguing that he poses a flight risk and that he showed no remorse. Although the court’s decision that he would be re-arrested, was leaked to pro-government media, he remained at his home and was detained there – demonstrating he had no intention of ‘fleeing’. He has consistently rejected the charges for which the prosecution has failed to provide any credible evidence.

I urge you to release Ahmet Altan immediately and unconditionally, as he is a prisoner of conscience jailed solely for exercising his right to freedom of expression.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

On the evening of 15 July 2016, elements within Turkey's armed forces launched a violent coup attempt. The coup attempt was quickly suppressed, as thousands of people took to the streets and state forces overpowered the coup plotters. Hundreds died, and thousands were injured in a night of terrible violence. In the immediate aftermath of the failed coup, the government accused the US-based cleric, Fethullah Gülen, as well as followers of his religious movement, whom they referred to as the "Fethullahist Terrorist Organization" (FETÖ/PDY), of conspiring to overthrow the government.

On 20 July 2016, the government declared a state of emergency, which lasted two years. A massive crackdown saw scores of journalists, writers, judges, prosecutors, and perceived and real critics of the AKP government jailed and charged as accomplices.

The day before the coup attempt, Ahmet Altan participated as a guest in a Turkish TV debate together with the programme's host, Nazlı Ilıcak, and economist and commentator, Mehmet Altan; who is also Ahmet Altan's brother. During the programme, they discussed Turkish politics, among other things. The Turkish authorities initially claimed that Ahmet Altan, Mehmet Altan and Nazlı Ilıcak had sent subliminal messages to those involved in the coup via the TV screen that night.

Nazlı Ilıcak was detained at the end of July and Ahmet Altan and Mehmet Altan were remanded in pre-trial detention in September 2016. The first trial in the case of Ahmet Altan, Mehmet Altan, Nazlı Ilıcak, and three others concluded with their conviction for "attempting to overthrow the constitutional order" and a life in prison without the possibility of parole, in February 2018. In July 2019, the Supreme Court of Appeals overturned their conviction, ruling Mehmet Altan's acquittal, and the re-trial of the other five defendants for "aiding a terrorist organisation without being its member".

On 4 November, Ahmet Altan was sentenced to ten-and-a-half years in prison and journalist, Nazlı Ilıcak, was sentenced to eight-years and nine-months in prison on ludicrous charges of "aiding a terrorist organisation without being its member". Both Ahmet Altan and Nazlı Ilıcak were released pending their appeals by the Istanbul Heavy Penal Court No. 26, subject to foreign travel bans. The court also unfairly convicted three others, including two media workers, and ruled that their pre-trial detention continues. Mehmet Altan, who was also prosecuted in the same trial, was acquitted by the court, in line with the Supreme Court of Appeals ruling in his case.

The prosecutor appealed against Ahmet Altan's release on 6 November. On 8 November, the Istanbul Heavy Penal Court No. 26 rejected the prosecutor's request for Ahmet Altan's return to prison, referring it to the Heavy Penal Court No. 27, which accepted the prosecutor's appeal on 12 November. While Ahmet Altan's lawyers were not informed of the decision, it was leaked to pro-government media. Ahmet Altan was taken into police custody the same evening at his home in Istanbul.

Ahmet Altan's re-arrest and detention give every appearance of being politically motivated, arbitrary, and incompatible with the right to liberty under Article 5 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which prohibits all arbitrary deprivation of liberty and the European Court of Human Rights has held that arbitrariness can arise where there has been an element of bad faith on the part of the authorities. His continued arbitrary detention in prison is a serious violation of his rights.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: English and Turkish.

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 7 January 2020

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Ahmet Altan (he/him)