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Trial of publisher revives row over Turkish 'insult' law

- British author fears attack over Armenian book
- Ankara accepts need for change, says Labour MEP

Helena Smith in Athens
The Guardian, Wednesday 5 December 2007

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Ragıp Zarakolu

Publisher Ragıp Zarakolu. Photograph: Heribert Proepper/AP

Nearly two years after the internationally acclaimed author Orhan Pamuk narrowly escaped imprisonment for statements that were thought to "insult Turkishness", the publisher of a British writer goes on trial today accused of the same charge.

Ragıp Zarakolu is facing up to three years in prison for publishing a book - promoting reconciliation between Turks and Armenians - by George Jerjian, a writer living in London.

Jerjian's book, *The Truth Will Set Us Free*, which was translated into Turkish in 2005, chronicles the life of his Armenian grandmother who survived the early 20th century massacres of Armenians thanks to an Ottoman soldier. The historical account has prompted as much controversy among the Armenian diaspora, not least in the US, as it has in Turkey.

"Mr Jerjian ... is a highly credible author with very moderate views," said the Labour MEP Richard Howitt, who will attend the hearing at Istanbul's Asliye Ceze courthouse. "If even he falls foul of Turkish law it shows how far they still have to go on freedom of expression."

The MEP, who is in Turkey in his role as vice-president of the human rights sub-committee of the European parliament, said Jerjian was too scared to visit Turkey "for fear he might be shot".

Zarakolu is being tried under Turkey's 301 article of law, the same legislation that was used against Pamuk, a Nobel prize winner, as well as 60 other local writers and journalists. Today's hearing comes in the wake of repeated promises by senior officials in Turkey's reform-minded neo-Islamist administration to rescind the notorious piece of legislation.

In February this year, six months before he went on to become head of state, Turkey's foreign minister, Abdullah Gul, declared the need for article 301 to be revised, saying: "There are certain problems with [it]. We see there are changes which must be made to this law."

Yesterday the Turkish justice minister, Mehmet Ali Sahin, reiterated the sentiment, telling Howitt that "freely expressed views that neither promote terrorism nor violence should be protected".

But while Turkish diplomats admit the contentious law has probably done more damage to Ankara's efforts to join the EU than any other single piece of legislation, observers say there has been little headway made over reforming the spirit and letter of the law.

In a climate of unabated nationalism, state prosecutors and police officials continue to level charges against artists, musicians and writers perceived to publicly denigrate Turkishness.

Vehemently denied by Turkish authorities, the Armenian genocide, which began in 1915, has sparked feverish debate, with several writers, including the Turkish-Armenian newspaper editor Hrant Dink, being sued for publicly questioning the official version of events. Dink, editor-in-chief of the bilingual paper *Agos*, was shot dead outside his Istanbul office this year by a self-avowed nationalist.

"The government has understood that it needs to change the article but it is now for parliament to pass it and for the courts to respect that change," Howitt told the Guardian from Ankara.

The neo-Islamists' unveiling of a new constitution later this month will be a significant turning point in the campaign to overturn the law, analysts say. "A test for the sincerity of their commitment will be that the new constitution lays down a framework where these cases never happen again," Howitt said.

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