

Turkish weekly defiantly refuses to soften satirical bite

ISTANBUL, TURKEY: Vilified by conservatives at home for standing by *Charlie Hebdo* after the Paris attacks, a Turkish satirical weekly is defiantly refusing to tone down its biting mockery of authority.



Leman magazine has remained critical throughout the decade the Islamic-rooted authorities led by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan have been in power, so there was no reason why they would keep silent in the face of the killing of 12 people at the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* by Islamist gunmen.

The magazine, which published a joint issue with *Charlie Hebdo* in 2002, is one of three leading satirical magazines in Turkey along with *Penguen* and *Uykusuz* in a surprisingly crowded market.

It brought out a special edition on Monday featuring on its cover a picture of slain cartoonist Georges Wolinski drawing in the yard of Istanbul's famed Eyup Sultan Mosque wearing an Islamic cap.

"Our master and big brother, a champion of peace and freedom, a philosopher, cartoonist Georges Wolinski..." read the caption of the picture, which Wolinski had given to *Leman* cartoonists as a gift.

The cover also features the pictures of four other cartoonists killed last week by the two Islamist gunmen. In a rare show of solidarity, *Leman*, *Penguen* and *Uykusuz* came out on Wednesday with identical black covers with the viral slogan "*Je suis Charlie*" (I am Charlie).

The tributes triggered hate messages on social media threatening violence against *Leman*, with some users saying it should "draw a lesson" from the attacks.

Zafer Aknar, *Leman's* managing editor, said that several death threats were phoned into the magazine's office since the attacks, and some "madmen" even paid them a visit to threaten the staff.

"They said they would kill us, chop off our heads and hands and cut us into pieces," he said. "Death threats are in the nature of our business, but we cannot back down," he said.

Laughter, weapon of choice

"Humour is our weapon against fear and we don't have any other weapon."

Turkey has long been accused of a lack of press freedom with Erdogan also accused of seeking to roll back the secularism enshrined in the country's constitution.

As Erdogan has become less tolerant of dissent, journalists have found themselves under increasing pressure, with scores losing their jobs, facing criminal lawsuits or jail time.

Leman, a pioneer of political satire magazines, has had its share of trials and prosecutions throughout the years, facing violence from extremists, attacks and even guns being fired at its offices.

Government officials as well as Erdogan launched dozens of libel suits against its cartoonists and heavy fines have been imposed on the magazine because of its portrayal of politicians.

Tuncay Akgun, the editor-in-chief of *Leman*, moved to Paris with his wife and children because he felt under too much pressure in Turkey. His cartoon collection, Pazar Sevisgenleri (Sunday Lovers), was withdrawn from bookshops on grounds of obscenity.

Unlike other satirical magazines which refrain from advertising their addresses, *Leman's* office is not hidden away, clearly visible from the bustling Istiklal avenue in central Istanbul. Within its walls, decorated with comic strips and old editions of *Leman*, all are welcome, from comic book fans to left-wing activists and critics of Erdogan.

Without necessarily subscribing to all the ideas of *Charlie Hebdo's* satirists, the weekly magazine has sustained a tradition of pushing the envelope of free speech.

"Erdogan spreads a culture of hatred that makes people intolerant towards even light humour," Aknar said.

'A claw against repression'

"But we will continue to serve as a claw against repression."

Leman, founded in 1991 and selling around 50,000 copies per week, has always found ways to poke fun at the powerful, with Erdogan the main source of inspiration since he came to power as premier in 2003.

It publishes cartoons depicting the ultra-conservative imams or the faithful, aimed at what the cartoonists call the "hypocrisy" and "the craving for power that abounds in the Islamic world".

Leman cartoonist Aslan Ozdemir acknowledged that the magazine wouldn't dare publish everything that *Charlie Hebdo* published, in particular cartoons lampooning Islam and the Prophet Mohammed.

"They would rip our skin from our bones," he said.

"We wouldn't be able to walk about in public."

"But our priority is not making fun of religion anyway. This is not self-censorship," he said.

"There are too many scandals and injustices, too much corruption and greed, too many lies, too much violence in Turkey, and as cartoonists, we need to deal with that first."

Source: AFP, via I-Net Bridge

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