

“Academics are fired, jailed, and blacklisted”

Like in many other parts of the world, academic independence and freedom in Turkey have long been influenced by the neoliberalization of universities and state control of the agenda in science and education,¹ including limitations on teaching or publishing on particularly sensitive political issues, such as the Kurdish question. Limits on academic independence have been a part of the Turkish political scene for a number of years. University campuses were often a site of ideological confrontations, and as radicalization continued and conflicts ensued, the post 1980-coup military regime created a state institution called the Higher Education Council (*Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu*, YÖK) to place some control over universities and to limit academic freedom. The state apparatus has continued to “cool” university activity and to restrict academic output since then.²

However, since the “We will be not be a party to this crime” petition released on January 11, 2016, calling for an end to curfews in Kurdish towns and a renewed commitment to the reconciliation process with Kurdish parties, the current Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) government has increased its reaction to academics and academia in general by firing, jailing, and starting legal proceedings against academics.

THE PETITION was signed by over a thousand academics in 89 universities in Turkey as well as a number of scholars abroad after curfews and an extended state of emergency were issued in mainly Kurdish areas of the country. The curfews came about as the peace process dissolved and clashes renewed in the region. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported serious human rights violations during



Banner for the release of “Arrested inmates” in the protest against the detention of friends who were arrested for the Academics’ statement on Peace.

the curfews, including numerous civilian casualties (OHCHR Report 2017).³ As a consequence of the clashes, the report estimates up to half a million people have been displaced.

Following the petition, YÖK released a statement regarding the petition, stating that it “cannot be associated with academic freedom” (*Hurriyet Daily News*, January 12, 2016). As a consequence 30 academics were detained, their homes raided by police, and their belongings confiscated. Universities opened disciplinary inquiries into signatories, with academics being questioned on their political views. Names, affiliations, and photographs of signatories were shared on major news outlets. Many academics received threats, and others felt forced to leave their homes and cities in order to keep safe.⁴ Four academics who read a statement to the press on March 14, 2016, about such rights violations against the peace academics were detained for weeks. While the petition clearly had a wide impact, it was not in the direction expected. The petition focused on the state of emergency and curfews in Kurdish cities, but the attention that came to the petition and to academics became fo-

cused instead on the rights of academics and academic freedom.

AFTER THE COUP attempt on July 15, 2016, the government enacted a state of emergency with the stated aim of countering threats to national security arising from the coup attempt. The state of emergency was renewed every three months until it ended after two years in July 2018. Under the state of emergency, the government had the power to issue executive decrees, which were used for the mass dismissal of civil servants, including academics. According to Amnesty International (2017), more than 100,000 civil servants were dismissed through decree law.⁵ These dismissals have had a serious effect not just on institutions, which have lost massive numbers of workers, but also on the lives of the people who have been removed from their positions, barred from working in universities across the country, and oftentimes prevented from leaving the country by having their passports rescinded.

Those who have managed to continue working the last few years have experienced increased concerns about surveillance in universities, even in the

classroom, as well as barriers to conducting and publishing research. Academics blacklisted by the government have been unable to receive funding from the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (*Türkiye Bilimsel ve Teknolojik Araştırma Kurumu*, TÜBİTAK), have been prevented from participating in international conferences, and have been prevented from ethics approval in their universities. It is not uncommon for academics abroad in order to bypass the bureaucratic restrictions in their own universities.

With conditions in the country's academic institutions deteriorating, many of the country's scholars have been looking to move abroad. Some reports have indicated that thousands have left for the UK, Germany, and France, with others still considering leaving (BBC, December 28, 2017). At least 698 petition signatories have applied for scholarships through the international network Scholars at Risk (personal communication, February 6, 2018).⁶

Those who remain in Turkey have attempted to continue their academic endeavors outside of the universities. A number of small academic collectives have popped up across the country, where academics dismissed from their positions give classes, collaborate on projects with other academics or with students, and have readings and other types of sessions in order to maintain their academic identity. Some members of these collectives had previously participated in academic political events, but others only became politicized after their dismissal from the university. The academic collectives, they say, have provided them the opportunity to give their time and attention to projects they are interested in, rather than having to worry about the administrative tasks they often felt constrained by in the university, though of course they are limited by the lack of financial and institutional support that is often needed to maintain their livelihoods.⁷

Though academics have experienced increasingly difficult conditions, it is often students who have received the brunt of restrictions and censorship in academia



Four academics being charged after signing the petition "We will not be a party to this crime".

over the years. The increased suppression has impacted them as well; for example, 35 university students from Boğaziçi University in Istanbul were detained in March 19th after peaceful anti-war protests. Thirteen of them were held for three months before being released, and the event left a strong police presence at the Boğaziçi campus for weeks afterward. Police also cracked down on faculty, staff, and student protests of mass dismissals at Ankara University on February 10, 2017. One week later, Istanbul Technical University launched disciplinary investigations against 24 students protesting the same decree (Academic Freedom Monitoring Project 2017). Students have reported increased threats of disciplinary action to deter participation in political protests on campus, creating increased pressure to remain silent (Human Rights Watch 2018).

OVERALL, THE NUMEROUS rights violations show, among other things, the vulnerability and lack of job security that academics in Turkey face, as well as the lack of capacity of universities to defend academic freedom.⁸ In addition to options abroad, moving forward it might be that academics look more and more outside the university for a means to maintain their scholarly activities. In doing so, they strive to maintain their own lines of research while avoiding the more repressive environments of the university. Solidarity networks abroad have supported academics in Turkey by providing small to mid-scale funding, preparing short-term work possibilities, creating research asylums abroad through various Scholars at Risk networks, providing honorary or affiliated memberships to individuals dismissed from their positions, or hold-

ing meetings at annual conferences to keep attention on the subject of academics at risk. With increased concern for academic freedom globally, it seems clear that Turkey is not a singular case and that the subject of academic freedom will continue to be an important issue that will need to be addressed in the future. ✖

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