

# A Critical Contribution to Academic Freedom in Turkey

Written by Gonenc Uysal

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GONENC UYSAL, MAR 2 2016

On 11<sup>th</sup> January 2016, Academics for Peace (AfP) published a petition, which was signed by more than one thousand academics, calling for the state of Turkey to stop the violations of human rights, and compensate the victims, in the Southeast region and for the AKP government to solve the Kurdish question. The petition resulted in an uproar both at the state and societal levels. While the majority of academics supported the AfP's initiative in accordance with academic freedom, a significant minority of academics published a counter-petition declaring their support for the state's actions in the region. However, academic freedom was massively curtailed with police probes, arrests and detentions, disciplinary proceedings, defamation and targeting in the media, and even intimidation by colleagues and students against signatories of the AfP's petition. This article will discuss academic freedom in Turkey in relation to the consolidation of the authoritarian framework of neoliberal-conservatism. Firstly, it will summarise the neoliberal-conservative transition of the global and domestic capitalist systems. Secondly, it will summarise the neoliberal-conservative restructuring of the higher education system. Thirdly, it will examine the recent authoritarian practices aimed to curtail academic freedom. Finally, it will discuss possibilities to counter such authoritarian practices to compel the neoliberal-conservative system to retreat.

The neoliberal transition of the global capitalist system has meant the consolidation of the hegemony of finance capital at the international and domestic levels including in Turkey. Since neoliberalism requires the free movement of capital and the control over potentially opposing social forces (Harvey, 2007), it has resulted in authoritarian restructuring of the state and societal formation in Turkey. This has been followed by a purge of the social democratic welfare state with an authoritarian regulatory state whose democratic framework was significantly curtailed, including flexibilisation and deregulation of the labour force through limitations on the right to unionise and strike, and favouring both international and domestic capital through privatisation, subcontracting and narrowing the public sector, and promoting import-dependent exports and attracting short-term speculative capital (Boratav, 2014). In the meantime, in the face of deteriorating economic, social and political conditions for the subordinate classes, the AKP government has consolidated its conservative/Islamist project both at the state and societal levels. In this way, it has aimed to veil the class struggles and create an obedient society.

Within this framework, the AKP broadened and deepened the neoliberal restructuring of the higher education sector. Such restructuring has reinterpreted the aims and goals of universities in accordance with the global and domestic capitalist system. This restructuring resulted in the decrease in focus on social problems and the increase in research in accordance with expectations of the market. The reduction in public funding for universities, which was in accordance with the decline of the state's role in the economy, has compelled universities towards further commercialisation and privatisation (Aslan, 2008). Most significantly, there has been a significant increase in the number of foundation/private universities (Birler, 2012). This neoliberal restructuring of the higher education sector was inevitably complemented with the articulation of conservative/Islamist symbols as the basis of social construction (Ercan, 2012). Therefore, academic freedom has already been curtailed and is kept under control in accordance with the interests of capital in the neoliberal system.

Such authoritarian neoliberal-conservative restructuring inevitably resulted in opposition and criticism in the academy. In order to maintain supervisory control over academics and students, the AKP government has often utilised the *Yuksekogretim Kurulu* (Council of Higher Education –YOK), which was established to curtail the autonomy of universities by submitting universities to the control of the executive. For instance, the YOK reshuffled

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the list of candidates for university presidencies who were ranked in accordance with the election results in their own universities. It should be noted that the YOK also played an important role during recent violations of academic freedom. For instance, although certain faculties declared their support for the academic freedom of their academic staff who had signed the petition, the university presidencies still launched investigations against signatories. It should be underlined that foundation/private universities similarly played a more important role in this process. The flexibilisation of labour in the private sector enabled the foundation/private universities to employ stricter measures against academic freedom. As a result, certain foundation/private universities sacked signatory academics by either suspending their teaching or annulling their contracts.

However, the curtailing of academic freedom cannot be reduced to certain violations of freedom of speech. On the contrary, it should be considered as a continuous process embracing and penetrating every moment of and individual in the academy. In relation to the strategy of political polarisation among academics and students, the practices of targeting, defamation and witch-hunts have served as a means to purge critical factions in times of hegemonic crises. Most significantly, during the Ergenekon and the Sledgehammer (*Balyoz*) trials, which turned out to be a purge and exercise in coercion of critical factions at the state and societal levels (Jenkins, 2011), a small minority of academics, who were fiery critics, were arrested and tried. Later on, following the Gezi Park protests, increasing numbers of students and academics voiced their criticisms and participated in protests. For instance, the university president(s) who declared their support for freedom of speech, have often been provocatively targeted by conservative –and sometimes liberal –factions within the academia. Recently, *signatories of the AfP's petition have continuously been targeted and defamed by being portrayed as 'hendekci'* (ditch-supporter, suggesting that they support the PKK –*Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan* –'s terrorist activities).

Recently, some leaked news claimed that the AKP government has been working on a new regulation to abolish the democratic system of elections in universities and introduce the direct appointment of university presidents by the President upon nomination by the YOK by the summer of 2016. In the meantime, academics were called to administer the *imam-hatip* schools. It should be noted that the *imam-hatip* (imam and preacher) schools, secondary schools that offer religious schooling parallel and alternative to the secular education (Aksin, 2011: 172), aim to create an obedient and conservative labour force. Therefore, it can be argued that the authoritarian framework of neoliberal-conservatism has aimed to curtail the academic freedom to its outmost borders, if not to completely purge it. While the state universities seem to suffer greatly from the YOK's supervisory role over the academy, the foundation/private universities seem to contribute to the curtailing of academic freedom owing to the flexibilisation of labour. Due to the penetrating power of neoliberal-conservatism, polarisation and witch-hunt among academics and students can be argued to continue if not increase.

Academic freedom has constituted the core of critical, universal and emancipatory thinking and knowledge for present and future generations both at the domestic and international levels. Also, academic freedom has internally related to the labour rights and the situation of labour force within the context of the capitalist system. Thus, the 'burning' question is: 'what is to be done?' (Lenin, 1961: 347). The most important and primary issue remains the necessity of the collective attempt to unveil the catastrophic consequences of the authoritarian framework of neoliberal-conservatism at the economic, political and social levels. By unveiling such consequences, the internal relationship between deteriorating academic freedom and neoliberal-conservative restructuring can be understood as a whole. In the words attributed to Voltaire, 'I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it' (Hall, 1906: 199), solidarity and collective action among academics and students must be realised in practice.

In this sense, certain student unions can be considered as fairly activist, organising public and academic events and peaceful protests and demonstrations, and petitions. However, as the case of the AfP's petition demonstrated, particular academics seem to engage with particular non-governmental organisations and/or political parties that focus on certain economic, political and social issues. Such disorganisation and narrow focus among academics demonstrates the most important handicap on solidarity and collective action. Considering the fact that academics are already denied the exercise of certain labour rights, the majority of academics seem to fail to understand the internal relationship between the pressure on academic freedom and the neoliberal-conservative pressure on the labour force. Therefore, academics desperately need to internalise and realise a strong tradition of unionisation and

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activism. In the meantime, public and academic events, peaceful protests and demonstrations, and petitions, which relate academic freedom to the wider economic, political and social issues pertaining to the capitalist system, remain crucial.

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## About the author:

**Gonenc Uysal** is pursuing a PhD in War Studies at King's College London. Gonenc has published articles with *The Centre for Policy and Research on Turkey (Research Turkey)* and *E-International Relations*, and a book review in *Review of Social Studies*. She has also written several blog posts for *Strife*. Her next book review will be published in *Kurdish Studies*.