

ROUNDTABLE: DISPLACED SCHOLARS AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

## The AKP-Era Higher Education Strategies for Establishing Hegemony over Turkish Universities

Nihat Celik

School of Public Affairs, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA, USA  
Email: [ncelik@sdsu.edu](mailto:ncelik@sdsu.edu)

“Your political hegemony ended; your cultural hegemony, too, will end.”<sup>1</sup>

The increasing number of interventions at Turkish universities by the ruling AKP party (Justice and Development; Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) in the last decade culminated in a wave of student protests in January 2021 following Melih Bulu’s appointment as the new president of the prestigious Boğaziçi University. Bulu, who is a professor of business administration and has served as president at other relatively newly established and small private universities (İstinye University and Haliç University), was appointed by a presidential decree of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan after the government abolished the university-wide elections for university presidents at Turkish universities. He was regarded as an “implant” at the university by the faculty and students, who organized mass protests against the “trustee rector” (*kayıyum rektör*) a nickname given to him due to his appointment by the government without elections. This resistance brought the Turkish university system and government intrusions under focus at home and abroad.<sup>2</sup>

The current resistance results from accumulated frustration with the increasing levels of political interventions that aim to shape the university and the whole education system in general. This short piece will first highlight the importance of universities as sites of knowledge production, tools of hegemony, and social transformation, and then will explain the factors that have led to increasing political interventions in the Turkish academic system.

### Being a Scholar in Turkey: Always in the Line of Fire

Given the importance of education systems and universities in creating and sustaining or undermining a hegemonic social order, a succession of governments in Turkey have attempted to control them during various periods. In the 1940s, in the atmosphere of the Second World War, increasing political activities of university staff and students, mostly centering around Communist and Pan-Turkist ideologies, were seen as a threat by the authorities. The Law on Universities of 1946, despite allowing the oversight of the Ministry of Education over universities as head of the Inter-University Board, provided universities some autonomy; for example, university presidents were elected by faculty for a term of

<sup>1</sup> Fahrettin Altun (@fahrettinaltun) “Siyasi hegemonyanız bitti, kültürel hegemonyanız da bitecek, Twitter, 5 July 2018, <https://twitter.com/fahrettinaltun/status/1014916512598167555?lang=en>. Fahrettin Altun is the director of communications for the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey.

<sup>2</sup> Claire Busch and Merve Pehlivan, “The High Stakes of Turkey’s University Protests,” *Foreign Policy*, 9 February 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/09/the-high-stakes-of-turkeys-university-protests>.

two years (Article 12).<sup>3</sup> The transition to multiparty politics in 1950 and the conditions imposed by the Cold War transformed universities into political arenas even though the country had only three universities during that period: Istanbul University, Istanbul Technical University (ITU), and Ankara University. In 1956, the Middle East Technical University (METU) was established in Ankara. In 1948, during the era of single-party rule (1923–50), the People's Republican Party (CHP) terminated scholars like Pertev Naili Boratav, Behice Boran, and Niyazi Berkes for their “radical-left activities.” Following the transition to multiparty politics in 1950, the Democrat Party (DP) resorted to the same methods even more aggressively to control universities. In 1953, by modifying the legislation, the DP government prohibited the faculty from political party membership and any political activity and allowed investigations by the university senates for violators of the rule.<sup>4</sup> These developments fueled the debate about the autonomy of universities and led to further politicization and resistance of the faculty and students to DP rule. Student protests preceded the military coup or “Revolution” of May 27, 1960 that removed the DP from power. Five months later, on October 28, 147 scholars were expelled from their posts.<sup>5</sup> However, these expulsions were met with resistance from the faculty and students. The next day, all four university presidents resigned from their posts to protest the expulsions; in April 1962 all these scholars were allowed to return to their universities following modification of the legislation.<sup>6</sup> The new constitution provided broader autonomy to universities. Steps were taken to ensure their administrative and scientific autonomy and provide job security to the faculty to prevent political expulsions (Article 120).<sup>7</sup> Universities enjoyed a period of relative freedom for the first time by obtaining scientific and administrative autonomy, yet an increasing level of politicization and rising student movements created fears among conservative political parties, and in 1971 this autonomy was curbed.<sup>8</sup> The government obtained the authority to investigate and prosecute individuals who committed crimes within the jurisdiction of universities and to take control of university campuses in case the university administration failed to prevent acts that endangered the learning and teaching rights of others. An exception was added to the clause that provided job security to faculty and allowed the government to terminate scholars following a government takeover of the university.<sup>9</sup>

With the military coup of September 12, 1980, the remaining autonomy of universities was targeted because universities were seen as areas of political mobilization. With the Law on Higher Education of 1981, the Higher Education Council (HEC) was established, and its members were appointed principally by the executive branch. Under the new system, university presidents were selected and appointed by the president from four candidates nominated by the HEC for five years (Article 13).<sup>10</sup> With this change, elections were prohibited for the first time since their inception in 1946. In addition, with a modification of the Law on Martial Law (no. 1402), garrison commanders who also enforced martial law gained the authority to remove any civil servant through an administrative ruling. Approximately

<sup>3</sup> “Üniversiteler Kanunu (No. 4936, 13 June 1946),” *Resmî Gazete*, 18 June 1946, 10780, <https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/arsiv/6336.pdf> (accessed 24 May 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Ali Arslan, “Çok Partili Döneme Geçişten 27 Mayıs’a Türkiye’de Siyaset ve Üniversite,” *Yakın Dönem Türkiye Araştırmaları*, no. 2 (2002): 59–61.

<sup>5</sup> Walter F. Weiker, “Academic Freedom and Problems of Higher Education in Turkey,” *Middle East Journal* 16, no. 3 (1962): 279.

<sup>6</sup> Especially see Mina Urgan’s memoirs for this period, since she was one of the 147 expelled scholars; Mina Urgan, *Bir Dinazorun Anıları* (Istanbul: YKY Yayınları, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> *Constitution of the Turkish Republic*, tr. Sadık Balkan, Ahmet Uysal, and Kemal H. Karpat (Ankara: 1961), 33.

<sup>8</sup> Bülent Tanör, “Turkish Universities Fall Silent,” *Index on Censorship* 3, no. 2 (1974): 39.

<sup>9</sup> “1961 Anayasası,” Constitutional Court of the Republic of Turkey, <https://www.anayasa.gov.tr/tr/mevzuat/oncelki-anayasalar/1961-anayasasi> (accessed 21 May 2022).

<sup>10</sup> “Yükseköğretim Kanunu (No. 2547, 4 November 1981),” *Resmî Gazete*, 6 November 1981, 9, <https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/arsiv/17506.pdf> (accessed 24 May 2022).

5,000 public employees (including approximately 200 renowned scholars), known as the “1402s,” were removed from their positions, barred from employment in the public sector, and denied passports. This led to the International Labor Organization (ILO) blacklisting Turkey for severely violating labor rights.<sup>11</sup> After a prolonged legal struggle, which culminated in the Council of State’s ruling in 1989 that found the terminations unconstitutional and unlawful, they were reinstated.<sup>12</sup>

Due to the increasing criticisms targeting the procedure of appointing university presidents directly by the president, in 1992 the legislation was modified and a middle ground reached. Under the new system, candidates were voted upon by the faculty, and the names of six candidates who received the highest votes were presented to the HEC. Then, the HEC would choose three candidates and present their names to the president for appointment (Article 13).<sup>13</sup>

### The AKP’s Approach to Higher Education before and after Its Consolidation of Power

The 1990s were marked by discussions on the rise of political Islam, secularism, and the hijab ban at Turkish universities. The AKP, an offspring of the Welfare Party led by Necmettin Erbakan, which was closed by the Constitutional Court for actively seeking to destroy the secular character of the state, portrayed itself as a “conservative democratic” party.<sup>14</sup> Political reforms, the promotion of individual rights, and European Union membership were top priorities. The AKP associated the HEC with the statist powers who had doubts about the party because of its Islamist past. For this reason, its party program criticized the HEC and promised to grant autonomy to universities while curbing the powers of the HEC. There remained a need for sweeping reforms in the field of higher education. The HEC would gain a new structure as an organization that coordinated universities and set norms, and universities would gain administrative and academic autonomy and become institutions in which faculty and students would be free from pressures, intimidation, and antidemocratic acts, scientific knowledge would be produced, and research and teaching would be the main priorities.<sup>15</sup>

With former chief justice of the Constitutional Court (CC) Ahmet Necdet Sezer as president (2000–7), the AKP faced many difficulties as laws enacted by the government were vetoed by him for violating the constitution. Sezer also used his presidential discretion and, in some cases, appointed university presidents who did not receive the highest vote at university-level elections. This was seen as a veto of the pro-AKP candidates and heavily criticized by the AKP, which likened these acts to a coup.<sup>16</sup> As a result, to eliminate the presidential discretion, the AKP made changes to the law, which were approved by its majority in the Parliament. In this new system, there was no university-level election process, and the names of three candidates for a university president’s position were to be presented to the president by the minister of education. Then, the president would appoint one of them. This would bypass the faculty’s choices and force the president to pick one candidate from among the names presented by the government. Not surprisingly, both President Sezer and the main opposition party, the CHP, appealed to the CC against the modifications on the grounds of constitutional violations. The CC, in its majority ruling (dissented by Chief Justice Haşım

<sup>11</sup> Aziz Çelik, “1402’likler, tasfiyeler, ve ILO normları,” *Birgün*, 30 September 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Emre Kongar, “Günümüzün 1402’likleri: KHK’lılar,” *Cumhuriyet*, 9 September 2018.

<sup>13</sup> “4.11.1981 Tarih ve 2547 Sayılı Yükseköğretim Kanununun 13 üncü Maddesinin Değiştirilmesi Hakkında Kanun (No. 3826, 1 July 1992),” Turkish Grand National Assembly, [https://www5.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanaklar/KANUNLAR\\_KARARLAR/kanuntbmmc075/kanuntbmmc075/kanuntbmmc07503826.pdf](https://www5.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanaklar/KANUNLAR_KARARLAR/kanuntbmmc075/kanuntbmmc075/kanuntbmmc07503826.pdf) (accessed 24 May 2022).

<sup>14</sup> Gareth Jenkins, “Muslim Democrats in Turkey?” *Survival* 45, no. 1 (2003): 45–66.

<sup>15</sup> Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, *Kalkınma ve Demokratikleşme Programı* (Ankara: 2002), 76, <https://acikerisim.tbmm.gov.tr/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11543/926/200205071.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> (accessed 25 May 2022).

<sup>16</sup> “Hanedanlığa Onay,” *Yeni Şafak*, 28 November 2006; “Diğer Ülkelerde Rektör Nasıl Seçiliyor?” *Haber 7*, 31 July 2008, <https://www.haber7.com/egitim/haber/335340-diger-ulkelerde-rektor-nasil-seciliyor> (accessed 26 May 2022).

Kılıç and Justice Sacit Adalı) dated May 4, 2006, decided to reverse the modifications for violating the scientific autonomy of universities granted by the constitution.<sup>17</sup> This setback did not deter the AKP. In 2007, the election method for the founding presidents of newly established universities was modified. The CC reversed these modifications unanimously, emphasizing the autonomy of universities and the need to protect them from political pressures.<sup>18</sup> With the AKP candidate Abdullah Gül's election as president in 2007, the AKP finally gained more control over state institutions, including universities. Yet Gül also appointed many university presidents who failed to receive the highest vote at university-wide elections, a practice that was very heavily criticized within AKP circles in President Sezer's era. A comparison reveals that Sezer appointed 80 percent of the candidates who received the highest votes, while this ratio was 52 percent for Gül.<sup>19</sup>

### The Consolidation of Power and Establishment of a Competitive Authoritarian Regime

Turkey's democracy deficit presented an opportunity for democratic consolidation, however the country moved in the opposite direction, especially after the June 2011 general elections, despite the AKP's initial reformist and prodemocracy stance. The AKP, under Erdoğan's leadership, consolidated its grip over the country and state apparatus. This illiberal turn continued with the erosion of individual freedoms, the independence of the judiciary, and the system of checks and balances, reflecting similar trends of democratic backsliding in other parts of the world.<sup>20</sup> Drawing on the work of Levitsky and Way about competitive authoritarian regimes, Turkish scholars started to classify Turkey in this category after the June 2015 elections.<sup>21</sup> The Gezi Park protests that occurred in May 2013 were the reaction, of especially the university youth, against not only an urban project but also against the centralization of power, cronyism, and authoritarianism.<sup>22</sup> The protestors also decried the intolerant attitude of the AKP government regarding different lifestyles, and top-down Islamization attempts.<sup>23</sup> Erdoğan had repeatedly underlined his objective of creating a "pious generation" (*dindar nesil*) and through his educational and youth policies attempted to foster new norms and, in the end, fashion a more conservative society.<sup>24</sup> Not surprisingly, thanks to its significance, education became the site of hegemonic struggles and social engineering for the success of AKP's "New Turkey" (*Yeni Türkiye*) project.<sup>25</sup> For this goal, the Imam-Hatip schools (IHSs) that provide theological education at the high school and secondary school levels are widely employed by the AKP.<sup>26</sup> An increasing number of new IHSs have

<sup>17</sup> T. C. Anayasa Mahkemesi, "Anayasa Mahkemesi Kararı-AYM, E.2006/51, K.2006/57, 04/05/2006," 4 May 2006, <https://normkararlarbilgibankasi.anayasa.gov.tr/ND/2006/57> (accessed 26 May 2022).

<sup>18</sup> T. C. Anayasa Mahkemesi, "Anayasa Mahkemesi Kararı (AYM, E.2007/5, K.2007/18, 07/02/2007)," 7 February 2007, <https://normkararlarbilgibankasi.anayasa.gov.tr/ND/2007/18> (accessed 26 May 2022).

<sup>19</sup> "Gül'ün rektör farkı," *Cumhuriyet*, 18 April 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Steven Lewitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Broadway Books, 2018).

<sup>21</sup> Steven Lewitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu, "Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey," *Third World Quarterly* 37, no. 9 (2016): 1596.

<sup>22</sup> Aslı Iğsız, "Brand Turkey and the Gezi Protests: Authoritarianism in Flux, Law and Neoliberalism," in *The Making of a Protest Movement in Turkey: #occupygezi*, ed. U. Özkırmırlı, (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2014), 25.

<sup>23</sup> Ayhan Kaya, "Islamisation of Turkey under the AKP Rule: Empowering Family, Faith and Charity," *South European Society and Politics* 20, no. 1 (2015): 47.

<sup>24</sup> Demet Lüküslü, "Creating a Pious Generation: Youth and Education Policies of the AKP in Turkey," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 637.

<sup>25</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti and Zühre Emanet, "Education as Battleground: The Capture of Minds in Turkey," *Globalizations* 14, no. 6 (2017): 869.

<sup>26</sup> Mustafa Kemal Coşkun and Burcu Şentürk, "The Growth of Islamic Education in Turkey: The AKP's Policies Toward Imam-Hatip Schools," in *Neoliberal Transformation of Education in Turkey*, ed. K. İnal and G. Akkaymak (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 165.

been opened, and high schools and secondary schools that provide secular education are converted into IHSs by the Ministry of Education, ignoring the demands of the residents in these neighborhoods. In 2012, there were 573 IHSs (high schools); by 2018, this number had risen to 1,623. In addition, for the graduates of the elementary schools, 3,934 secondary/middle school level IHSs were established, which did not exist in 2012, and a total of 1.3 million students were enrolled at these schools in 2018.<sup>27</sup>

In April 2017, Turkey transitioned from a parliamentary government to the presidential system. The new system replaced the politically neutral president with a politically active president who may serve as the chairperson of a political party at the same time. It was seen as the institutionalization of the competitive authoritarian regime.<sup>28</sup> Even though elections constitute the central arena of struggle in competitive authoritarian regimes, institutions such as local governments, subnational legislatures, media, civic associations, universities, and courts are potential sites of dissidence and conflict.<sup>29</sup>

In this environment of increasing authoritarianism, academics in Turkey faced various challenges. First, members of the Academics for Peace initiative who signed a petition criticizing the government's policy on the Kurdish issue in January 2016 faced criminal charges, prison sentences, and threats, in addition to losing their jobs.<sup>30</sup> However, for them and for the rest of the academic community, the real challenges began following the failed coup attempt in July 2016. The government declared a state of emergency akin to martial law that suspended some amendments of the Constitution and individual rights, paved the way for the state to rule by emergency decrees, and abolished due process requirements. As a result, fifteen private universities declared to be affiliated with the Gulenists were closed down, and more than 100,000 public employees, including thousands of academics at different ranks, were dismissed by governmental decrees for claims of connection to terrorist organizations.<sup>31</sup> The state of emergency powers provided a great opportunity for the AKP to shape the academic community for its political purposes, as it allowed the termination of scholars of varying ideological positions with a stroke of the pen. Academics were placed under an employment ban as they were blacklisted by the government, and their passports were confiscated so they would not be able to work abroad, a situation described as "civic death" (*sivil ölüm*) by the victims. In some cases, they also faced criminal charges and prison sentences. Approximately 8,000 academics lost their jobs due to dismissals and campus closings.<sup>32</sup> These mass dismissals were unprecedented in Turkish history.

Such emergency decrees are normally limited to a certain period of time, and they bear no results or effect after the state of emergency ends. For this reason, they are kept outside the judicial oversight of the CC. The AKP issued 32 state of emergency decrees and amended 154 laws during this two-year period, not to mention transitioning to a presidential system.<sup>33</sup> These changes made the state of emergency conditions permanent.

These strategies served two important purposes in silencing the academic community in Turkey. First, tenure protection, due process rights at termination, the right to appeal, and

<sup>27</sup> "Bir yılda 798 yeni imam hatip okulu açıldı, dini eğitim alan öğrenci sayısı 1.3 milyona ulaştı," T24, 26 October 2019, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/bir-yilda-798-yeni-imam-hatip-okulu-acildi-din-egitim-ogrenci-sayisi-1-3-milyona-ulasti,845477> (accessed 26 May 2022).

<sup>28</sup> Koray Çalışkan, "Toward a New Political Regime in Turkey: From Competitive Toward Full Authoritarianism," *New Perspectives on Turkey*, no. 58 (2018): 29–30.

<sup>29</sup> Andreas Schedler, "The Logic of Electoral Authoritarianism," in *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition*, ed. Andreas Schedler (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2006), 1–23.

<sup>30</sup> See Academics for Peace, "About Us," <https://barisicinakademisyenler.net/node/1> (accessed 28 May 2022).

<sup>31</sup> "Turkey Ends State of Emergency after Two Years," BBC, 18 July 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44881328> (accessed 28 May 2022).

<sup>32</sup> Seçkin Sertdemir Özdemir, "Civic Death as a Mechanism of Retributive Punishment: Academic Purges in Turkey," *Punishment & Society* 23, no. 2 (2021): 145.

<sup>33</sup> Zafer Yılmaz, "The Genesis of the 'Exceptional' Republic: The Permanency of the Political Crisis and the Constitution of Legal Emergency Power in Turkey," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 5 (2019): 732.

judicial review have been abolished. Scholars can be dismissed at any time by government decree. Because they lose their job security and tenure protections and face the constant risk of “civic death,” self-censorship is encouraged.<sup>34</sup> In addition, any private university can easily be closed down by the government. For example, Ahmet Davutoğlu, the former prime minister, minister of foreign affairs and a leading member of the AKP, started criticizing his own party and then resigned in 2019 to form a new political party. After he switched to the opposition, the government closed down İstanbul Şehir University (established in 2008) with a presidential decree in June 2020 because this university was owned by a foundation affiliated with Davutoğlu.<sup>35</sup> Second, with emergency law 676, issued on October 29, 2016, academic staff at universities are completely bypassed in the election of university presidents.<sup>36</sup> In this new system, the HEC presents the names of three professors with at least three years of experience, and the president appoints one of them as university president with a decree. Again, the election of university presidents by the faculty was the method introduced in 1946 until it was abolished by the military government following the coup of 1980, to be reintroduced in 1992.

The AKP used this method first at Boğaziçi University. Gülay Barbarasoğlu, who received 80 percent of the votes in the elections held on July 12, 2016, waited for her appointment for months. However, with the aforementioned state of emergency decree, Erdoğan appointed Mehmed Özkan, who was not even a candidate in the elections. In protest, Barbarasoğlu chose to retire.<sup>37</sup> Although it was possible for the AKP to control the appointments of rectors at various newly established universities, in universities with institutional culture and tradition, it would be more difficult to get its candidates elected. Abolishing the elections altogether was the solution to the problem.

The appointment of rectors and deans is important because they serve the purpose of transforming the universities from within. These administrators enjoy a great deal of authority on issues ranging from hiring and firing of faculty, student clubs and their activities, research project approvals, to any other academic or social activities (such as concerts, panels, and conferences). In this light Erdoğan has preferred appointing professors of theology as university presidents.<sup>38</sup> Even graduation ceremonies may become areas of resistance and protest. In the graduation ceremonies at METU, ITU, Boğaziçi University, and Piri Reis University in the last decade, students have protested against the government and university presidents appointed by the government.<sup>39</sup> Fearing such actions, METU and Boğaziçi University canceled their all-university graduation ceremonies in 2022. The main opposition party (CHP) leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu encouraged students to continue the university traditions and asked the university presidents to allow the graduation ceremonies.<sup>40</sup> Finally, the ITU yielded to the pressure and allowed students and faculty to organize their own graduation ceremony at the university’s stadium by allowing only the immediate family

<sup>34</sup> “Turkey: Government Targeting Academics,” Human Rights Watch, 14 May 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/14/turkey-government-targeting-academics> (accessed 28 May 2022).

<sup>35</sup> Hasan Kosebalaban, “The Turkish Government Closed a University Because It Fears Free Speech,” *Foreign Policy*, 10 July 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/10/the-turkish-government-closed-a-university-because-it-fears-free-speech> (accessed 28 May 2022).

<sup>36</sup> “Olağanüstü Hal Kapsamında Bazı Düzenlemeler Yapılması Hakkında Kanun Hükmünde Kararname (Karar sayısı: KHK/676, 29 Ekim 2016),” *Resmî Gazete*, 29 October 2016, <https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2016/10/20161029-5.htm> (accessed 28 May 2022).

<sup>37</sup> “Boğaziçi rektörü akademik hayatı noktaladı,” *Gazete Duvar*, 13 November 2016, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/gundem/2016/11/13/bogazici-rektoru-akademik-hayati-noktaladi> (accessed 28 May 2022).

<sup>38</sup> “Üniversiteler ilahiyata teslim: İşte ilahiyatçı rektörlerin listesi,” *Sol*, 5 March 2021, <https://haber.sol.org.tr/haber/universiteler-ilahiyata-teslim-iste-ilahiyatci-ректорlerin-listesi-27349> (accessed 28 May 2022).

<sup>39</sup> “İTÜ öğrencileri mezuniyet töreninde yaşananları protesto etti,” *Milliyet*, 11 July 2013; “İTÜ rektörü mezuniyet töreninde protesto edildi,” *Hürriyet*, 15 July 2016; “Piri Reis Üniversitesi’nin mezuniyet töreninde tarihi protesto! Bakan salonu terk etti,” *Sözcü*, 10 June 2018; “Boğaziçi Üniversitesi mezuniyetinde rektöre protesto,” *Sözcü*, 29 June 2018.

<sup>40</sup> “Kılıçdaroğlu, Boğaziçi ve ODTÜ öğrencilerine seslendi: Orada olacağız,” *Birgün*, 21 July 2022.

members of the graduates on the campus, with a heavy police presence to control any banners.<sup>41</sup> At Boğaziçi University, the university canceled alumni cards, which allowed the alumni to access the campus and library, because some graduates protested the university administration for canceling the university-wide graduation ceremony.<sup>42</sup>

There are other tools available to the government to exert greater control over the universities. As mentioned, Melih Bulu's appointment as president at Boğaziçi University caused a wave of protests. There was another problem. Although Bulu was appointed president, he could not be hired as a scholar by the university because he failed to meet the minimum appointment requirements of the university, which evaluates new hires based on their research and publications. Indeed, the presidential decree was rescinded by Erdoğan on July 15, 2021, 149 days after Bulu's appointment. Mehmet Naci İnci, a Boğaziçi physics professor was appointed a few weeks later, probably as a middle ground solution, to stop the protests by appointing a current faculty member at the university and minimize the impact of government intervention.<sup>43</sup> However, the faculty refused to take part in the administrative boards of the university so as not to legitimize the position of the government-appointed presidents, which caused a problem both for Bulu and for the new president İnci. To overcome this problem, the Law on Higher Education was modified again in 2018. The modification gave President Erdoğan the authority to open new faculties or close down the existing ones at universities without the involvement of the university senate. In February 2021, by presidential decree two new faculties (the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Communication) were founded at Boğaziçi. The purpose of establishing new faculties was to use them as a Trojan horse. According to the regulations, when a new faculty is established, to meet the urgent staffing demands, that faculty is exempt from the minimum appointment criteria of the university. This will allow the AKP to hire new academic staff from other universities and also appoint deans from outside, and this new academic staff will cooperate with the university president and serve on university boards to provide legitimacy to the political appointees.<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

Today the academic community in Turkey faces unprecedented levels of political pressure. Thousands of academics who lost their jobs and were placed under a travel ban and employment ban continue to face extreme difficulties; they cannot leave Turkey for job opportunities in other countries as they are denied their passports. Other scholars who managed to leave Turkey after some years of disrupted academic life benefit from the academic solidarity networks such as the Scholars at Risk and Scholar Rescue Fund, finding visiting professor or adjunct positions at universities in North America and Europe, but continue to struggle with uncertainty regarding their immigration status and the limited number of available academic jobs. Mass dismissals and elimination of job security and tenure protection, as well as appointment of the AKP's allies to key positions at universities, aim not only to control academia and transform universities but also to transform society by establishing a new social and cultural hegemony and creating a conservative generation that will help the AKP sustain its competitive authoritarian regime. Universities and faculty must comply or at least remain silent. One should not ignore the demonstrative effect of resistance: when intellectuals remain indifferent or silent on social issues rather than guiding the public, this also serves to silence the rest of the society and its institutions. However, as the 2019 local elections and ongoing resistance at Boğaziçi University show, there are new and

<sup>41</sup> "Mezuniyet töreni yasak tanmadı: Gelenek sürdü, ODTÜ yürüdü," *Evrensel*, 6 August 2022.

<sup>42</sup> "Boğaziçi Üniversitesi mezun kartlarını süresiz iptal etti; alternatif mezuniyet törenine izin vermedi," *Birgün*, 5 July 2022.

<sup>43</sup> "Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Rektörü Melih Bulu görevden alındı," *Sözcü*, 15 July 2021.

<sup>44</sup> "Boğaziçi'ne neden iki yeni fakülte açıldı?" *Sözcü*, 6 February 2021.

more powerful political dynamics of resistance and social mobilization in Turkey, especially among the youth, to challenge the AKP's claim of invincibility and its social hegemony.

**Acknowledgments.** I would like to thank our editors and Mimi Kirk of Georgetown University for their valuable comments and feedback.

---

**Cite this article:** Nihat Celik (2023). "The AKP-Era Higher Education Strategies for Establishing Hegemony over Turkish Universities." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 55, 520–527. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743823001034>