

“Peace Academics” from Turkey: Solidarity until the Peace Comes

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The politics in Turkey, after long-term unstable coalition governments, has been faced with a single-party government under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). The party came to power after the general elections of 3 November 2002, following the 2001 economic crisis. During the electoral campaign, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was the leader of the AKP and is the current president of Turkey, raised popular expectations but remained within framework of neo-liberal policies. The AKP created an authoritarian political climate in the name of stability and predictability, with the support of different sections of capital.

This authoritarian tendency resulted in the repressive enlargement of official politics at the expense of the majority. There was a broad consensus for “democratisation” among different segments in society including the Kurds, Alevis, the secular middle class and international actors, which emerged after the 2008 crisis, the 2013 corruption scandal and the Gezi Revolt. The progressive and pro-Kurdish People’s Democratic Party’s (HDP) managed to gain parliamentary representation in the 2015 election. However, instead of meeting the expectations of “democratisation”, state authoritarianism was imposed by the government on both the state apparatuses and the different social segments.

The political sphere has been polarised and homogenised through the discourses of nationalism, Islamism and conservatism. Leftists, Kurds and the Kurdish movement have always been defined as “internal enemies”. Others have joined their ranks. The “Kemalist elites” (civil and military bureaucrats), journalists, academics and later on the Gülenist bureaucratic cadres were treated as enemies of the state. AKP rule was consolidated by mobilising its own mass of voters under the leadership of the Islamic bourgeoisie (Bekmen, Özden and Akça, 2017).

The Academics for Peace (BAK) initiative was founded in November 2012 through a declaration supporting the hunger strike for peace by Kurdish prisoners. The academic and political turmoil that its signatories have experienced since the beginning of 2016 reflects the path Turkey has been following in recent years under AKP rule. We both worked as assistant professors at Mersin University in Turkey; we were dismissed from our positions because we were signatories of the “peace petition”. In addition, we were dismissed from all public duties, as were many of our colleagues, by the decree issued by the AKP government on 29 April 2017.

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The path pursued by the AKP becomes clearer if it is considered that the AKP government became much more than “authoritarian” over time – even if it had a liberal discourse in the beginning. Furthermore, it is important to understand how the Kurdish question evolved from peace talks to war, and to what degree labour, including academic labour, faces flexible and precarious working conditions under AKP rule.

The aim of this short paper is to deal with the repression in the academy in general and of the members of the BAK initiative in particular through presenting a general picture of the AKP period.

The University System in Turkey: A Short Review

Following the military coup in 1980, the higher education system in Turkey was comprehensively restructured through the Higher Education Law (No. 2547/1981). First of all, the system became more centralised, with all higher education institutions designated as universities and tied to the Council of Higher Education (COHE) (Yükseköğretim Kurulu, YÖK). Until the end of the 1990s, the university system consisted mainly of the public universities. However, although the establishment of private universities was not allowed by the law, since the beginning of the 2000s the number of private “foundation universities” has been extensively increased. In practice, it is quite possible to argue that these foundation universities have played a significant role in the neo-liberalisation of the university system in Turkey. This includes the flexibilisation of the working conditions of academics at these universities, the commercialisation and commodification of higher education “services” through market-based, high fees, capital’s involvement in the administrative mechanism of foundation universities, and high government subsidies in comparison with state universities. In addition, the foundation universities became new investment areas for capital, including Islamic capital. Their existence paved the way for the introduction of flexible working conditions and the methods of “business universitism” in the entire university system.

An important factor in the relationship between the state and universities is that all university staff – including the rectors and all academic positions – are seen as public servants and therefore are easily affected by government policies and agendas. For instance, some of the COHE’s members are directly appointed by the President. Moreover, he intervenes in the administrative process in universities, either directly or indirectly (COHE, 2014).

There are huge and unfair differences between foundation and public universities, considering that working conditions have been tied to market mechanisms through working contracts in the private sector. Beside this, rectors have to cultivate their relationship with the current government because of the state subsidies. After the petition, which we discuss in greater detail below, the foundation universities reacted more strongly than public universities against the signatories by ending their contracts unfairly and unlawfully. In public universities, academics tend to have permanent positions as civil servants. In addition, academics and administrative workers are often affiliated with public sector trade unions. For instance, the Education and Science Worker’s Union (Eğitim-Sen) is very active in the field of higher education, despite government repression against its members. There have also been some initiatives aimed at triggering resistance and organising academics and administrative staff at the foundation universities in recent years. But it is not easy for them to join a trade union, not only because of the complex labour relations regulations in Turkey but also because of the threat of losing their job. In contrast, even research assistants in public universities, who are mainly MA and PhD students, have relatively secure positions.

The problematic aspect is that universities are influenced directly by state policies, and changes in government policy lead to subjective and unfair actions based on the political views of academics or their membership of an opposing union. Since 2016, more than a thousand academics who do not support the authoritarian state policies have been adversely affected. Therefore, supporting the peace petition has led to civil and criminal investigations, dismissals and expulsions, arrests and detentions, prosecutions and restrictions on travel. The state of emergency has recently been extended for three months – for the fifth time. While the government has established an appellate body, the State of Emergency Appeals Commission, to allow victims of wrongful terminations and other errors to seek redress, the Commission has reviewed only a tiny fraction of the total number of applications filed since it began receiving them in July 2017 (SAR, 2018).

From Peace Talks to War in the Context of the “New Turkey”

In his seminal book, *Representations of the Intellectual*, Edward Said stated:

I believe there is a special duty to address the constituted and authorised powers of one’s own society, which are accountable to its citizenry, particularly when those powers are exercised in a manifestly disproportionate and immoral war, or in a deliberate program of discrimination, repression, and collective cruelty (Said, 1996: 98).

On 11 January 2016, a petition entitled “We will not be party to this crime” – later commonly known as the “peace petition” – was published with 1 128 signatures from different universities under the umbrella of “Academics for Peace”. It was later signed by about 1 000 additional signatories. Without doubt, this was a time of “immoral war”, “repression” and “collective cruelty”, to use Said’s words. There was injustice, state violence and fear among the majority of the academy resulting from injustice and state violence. Academics were facing the absence of the rule of law, precarious working conditions, an inflexible academic hierarchy, and, most importantly, repression from the government.

During the elections of 7 June 2015, the People’s Democratic Party gained 13 per cent of the votes and eighty seats in the parliament. The AKP remained the most popular party in the country with 40.9 per cent, but it lost nearly ten percentage points in comparison with the 2011 elections (Letsch, 2015). Subsequently, Erdoğan and the AKP campaigned for a “presidential system”, which was meant to ensure stability and security, and which was seen as a significant step in the establishment of a “new Turkey”. They tried to use a carrot to secure the electoral support of the Kurds – the peace talks. In fact, the AKP never approached the Kurdish question by considering the democratic national rights of the Kurds. For the AKP, the peace talks were a means to create a stable geographical space in which capital could accumulate by benefitting from the cheap labour power in the Kurdish cities created through government subsidies, especially in labour-intensive sectors in the region. In the beginning, the policy of the AKP was to support the Islamist, conservative, right-wing Kurdish political organisations, including Huda-Par, a radical Islamist, Hezbollah-based Kurdish political party. However, the majority of the Kurdish population gave extensive support to the secular and leftist Kurdish political parties. This was another explanation as to why the AKP tried to sit at the table with the HDP. At the time, gathering the Kurds under the umbrella of Islamism was not possible, and the peace-talks carrot did not convince the Kurds to support the “presidential regime”. Therefore, just before the election, HDP co-chair Selahattin Demirtas said:

I want to remind here our promise to the people not to abandon the principles of democracy, peace and freedom... We are not a movement of bargaining, a party of bargaining. There has never been a dirty deal between us and the AKP and there will never be... (*Hurriyet Daily News*, 17 March 2015).

When prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu accused Demirtaş of positioning himself with coup plotters, Demirtaş responded by saying:

I will in fact express my message in just one sentence: Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, you will never be able to be the head of the nation as long as the HDP exists and as long as the HDP people are on this soil (*Hurriyet Daily News*, 17 March 2015).

Then Demirtaş repeated three times: “We will not make you the president” (*Hurriyet Daily News*, 17 March 2015).

In the following days, the government reacted very badly. They abandoned the peace talks despite there being an expectation that the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan, would issue a message to draw a roadmap for disarmament of the PKK militants (*Hurriyet Daily News*, 17 March 2015). It was time for the drums of war.

After the breakdown of the peace talks, violence increased rapidly. After August 2015, the government imposed blanket, round-the-clock curfews in twenty-two towns and city neighbourhoods during the military operations, forbidding all movement without permission. Non-governmental organisations, human-rights organisations including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Physicians for Human Rights, representatives of the media and lawyers were prevented from documenting the military operations and the human-rights abuses committed by security forces and other armed groups (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

According to a report released in February 2017 by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, almost 2 000 people were killed in security operations in the south-east region of Turkey during the period July 2015 to December 2016. In addition, there were many cases of excessive and uncontrolled use of force, enforced disappearances, torture, the destruction of housing and cultural heritage, the prevention of access to emergency medical care, food and water, and violence against women. According to the report, the most significant violations to human rights occurred during the curfews when residential areas were cut off and people’s movement was restricted (OHCHR, 2017: 2).

The State’s Reaction to the Peace Petition

The peace petition was an outcome of the process described above. In addition, it was a reaction to the breakdown of the peace talks between the PKK and the Turkish state, and to the massive human right abuses in Kurdish cities, as may be understood from the following extract from the petition:

The Turkish state has effectively condemned its citizens in Sur, Silvan, Nusaybin, Cizre, Silopi, and many other towns and neighbourhoods in the Kurdish provinces to hunger through its use of curfews that have been ongoing for weeks. It has attacked these settlements with heavy weapons and equipment that would only be mobilised in wartime. As a result, the right to life, liberty, and security, and in particular the prohibition of torture and ill-treatment protected by the constitution and

international conventions have been violated. This deliberate and planned massacre is in serious violation of Turkey's own laws and international treaties to which Turkey is a party... (Academics for Peace, 2016b).

Two days later, on 12 January 2016, President Erdoğan strongly reacted against the petition and its signatories:

...this crowd, which calls itself academics, accuses the state through a statement. Not only this, they also invite foreigners to monitor developments. This is the mentality of colonialism.... Hey, you so-called intellectuals! You are not enlightened persons; you are dark.... You are nothing like intellectuals. You are ignorant and dark, not even knowing about the east or the southeast.... (*Hurriyet Daily News*, 12 January 2016).

According to Erdoğan, there was not a Kurdish question but a terror problem, and his words were a signal to the agents and institutions of the “new Turkey”. The process after the petition was marked by repression, flexibilisation and efforts to define who would be able to remain within the academy of the “new Turkey”, in which academic freedom and freedom of expression were absent.

In the following days, the Higher Education Council announced that, first, legal action would be taken against the academics signing the petition. The second step was to use social, national and local media to target the “peace academics” as traitors and terrorists; their photos were put on the front pages of the newspapers and broadcast on television. The peace scholars were also threatened at university campuses, so much so that some of them had to leave the cities in which they were living (Erkmen, 2016). Moreover, a government-backed mafia leader declared that he would have a shower in the blood of the scholars (Weaver, 2016). The third step included criminal investigations. These were carried out on the grounds of article 7 of the Anti-Terror Law (TMK), “doing propaganda in favour of terrorist organization”, or of articles 301 and 216 of the Turkish Penal Code (TCK), “insulting Turkishness”. There were also the disciplinary investigations by the universities (Open Democracy, 2016). During this third step, many academics were taken to police stations and sometimes subjected to detention and house searches (Erkmen, 2016). In a fourth step, peace academics were arrested on 15 March 2016 on charges of “terrorist propaganda” (Reuters, 2016). Although they were released on 22 April 2016, four peace academics from Mersin University faced the judge in July on charges of “terrorist propaganda” based on their Facebook accounts (Erkmen, 2016). The fifth, but not the last, step was the illegal dismissal of many academics from their jobs using the administrative mechanisms of the universities. This approach spread from one university to the next, as a way by which rectors proved their loyalty to the “new Turkey”.

Being a Dissident under the State of Emergency Regime

The attempted coup of 15 July 2016 was a turning point for Turkish capitalism, which marked the passage from the “neo-liberal authoritarian” form to “the state of emergency regime”, or from the intensification of power within the administrative apparatus of the state to the material intensification of power within Erdoğan's “palace”. This was achieved by sidelining parliament, the rule of law and the ideological state apparatuses, and rolling out a police state and the repressive state

apparatus in Poulantzas' sense.² In other words, after the attempted coup by a junta led by Gulenists, an Islamist organisation backed by the United States, who were collaborators of the AKP in the first years of its power, a state of emergency was declared on 15 July 2017, which has been extended several times. Furthermore, decrees issued by the government led to massive dismissals of public officials, including many members of the BAK. This became “the new normal” of the “new Turkey”. The mass arrest of the members of parliament, especially those belonging to the HDP, of municipal mayors in Kurdish cities and of journalists have been the other face of the “new Turkey”. At the same time, the decrees issued by the government relying on the state of emergency have restricted access to a fair trial (OHCHR, 2017: 4).

On 20 July 2017 the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey (DISK) released a report titled “The State of Emergency and Working Life: The State of Emergency is Harmful to Labour”. This report gives a broader picture on what the state of emergency regime means, not only for the working class but also in terms of the degree of the concentration of power, the loss of democratic rights, and the situation of freedom of expression and academic freedoms (DISK, 2017: 2). As can be seen from the report, a great deal happened from the time of the attempted coup to the anniversary of the state of emergency – 26 decrees were issued; 107 laws were amended by decrees; 157 journalists, 12 members of parliament and 85 mayors were imprisoned; 112 683 people were dismissed from public duties; and 5 602 scholars, including members of the BAK, were dismissed from their universities. Finally, 19 trade unions have been closed, while the main opposition political groups have been suppressed by state violence (DISK, 2017: 2).³ As for the situation of members of Academics for Peace, there have been extensive dismissals, forced resignations and forced retirements since the declaration of the petition (see Table 1).

In a meeting with international investors on 11 July 2017, President Erdoğan said, “We are enforcing emergency laws in order for our business world to function more easily”. He added:

So, let me ask: have you got any problems in the business world? Any delays? When we took on power, there was again a state of emergency enforced in Turkey but all factories were under the risk of strikes. Remember those days! But now, by making use of the state of emergency, we immediately intervene in workplaces that pose a threat of strike (*Birgün Daily*, 13 July 2017).

² For the concepts of neo-liberal “authoritarian statism” and “state of emergency regime”, see Poulantzas (1974, 1978). For literature evaluating the recent situation of Turkey as a turn from neo-liberal “authoritarian statism” to “the state of emergency regime” please see Oğuz (2016) and Kutun and Tören (2016).

³ These figures exclude the last decree, with the code 637, which was published in the Official Gazette on 24 December 2017.

Table 1: Rights violations against Academics for Peace

Action	Number of individuals affected*		
	Public	Private	Total
Removed and banned from public service through the decree laws + dismissal + resignation + retirement	410	57	467
Removed and banned from public service through the decree laws**	372	8	380
Dismissal	38	45	83
Resignation	15	10	25
Forced retirement	20	1	21
Disciplinary investigations of universities	442	63	505
Disciplinary investigations of the Higher Education Council. Decision of the Investigation Committee: Dismissal from public service. Pending COHE approval.	107	5	112
Preventive suspension ⁴	90	11	101
Suspension from administrative duty	3	4	7
Held in police custody	67	3	70
Pre-trial detention***	2	2	4

Notes:

*The numbers reflect how many people were treated in a particular manner; it should be noted that the situation is ongoing, and that the numbers are changing from day to day.

** Among the peace petition signatories, 42 academics who had been earlier dismissed or forced into resignation were also removed and banned from public service through the decree laws. In addition, PhD students within the Faculty Training Programme suffer rights violations due to the amendments in the procedures and principles and the decree laws.

*** Three academics stayed in pre-trial detention for 40 days and one for 22 days until they were released after the first court hearing. Their court case was opened under the Anti-terror Act Article 7/2 and is still continuing.

Source: *Academics for Peace (2017)*.

Concluding Remarks

It is possible to argue that the experiences of the members of the Academics for Peace initiative as part of “academic labour” does not differ from the general situation of the “workers of the world”. This takes a number of forms – unemployment; forced displacement; migration to different countries (to the different “academic labour markets”); precarious working relations, not only through state repression but also through the legal, institutional and structural transformation of the 2000s including “independent regulatory institutions”; the discourse of the need for a “primary

⁴ This phrase refers to a process whereby academics are temporarily removed from their positions without any judicial process being completed.

budget surplus”; the introduction of a market-oriented structural adjustment programme; a new labour law legalising subcontracting and informal work; and privatisation. In addition, as Ercan and Uzunyayla (2009: 113) point out, during this period “the concepts used by capital such as efficiency, quality, and flexibility have been incorporated into curricula starting with primary education, and they have been presented as the key elements of social change”.

As for the resistance, examples include solidarity campaigns by various institutions including trade unions and academic associations, international boycott campaigns against the universities in Turkey, alternative universities including “solidarity academies” in different cities in Turkey and the “Off-University” in Germany (see below). The resistance has been organised, and will continue to be organised, by Academics for Peace until peace comes to Turkey.

After the crackdown, solidarity actions have been taken at both national and international levels. The members of Eğitim-Sen (Education Union) work as civil servants; they are mainly politically leftist and social democrats, and sensitive to Kurdish and Alevi issues. At the national level, it is the foremost organisation organising regular protests and supporting its members financially and legally in this process. Solidarity Academies is another important action founded in 2016 by academics who were discharged through statutory decrees but who intended to continue to pass on their academic knowledge through alternative local academic organisations in Ankara, Antalya, Dersim, Eskişehir, İstanbul, İzmir, Kocaeli, Mardin, Mersin and Urfa. One of the aims is to maintain their relationship with those who still want to learn. This requires courage in producing and sharing knowledge, and in prioritising peace, equality, freedom and solidarity which are presently excluded from the universities (Bianet, 2018). At the international level, Germany is the foremost arrival country for Turkish academics who have gone into exile. There are significant numbers of academics in the country who have come through special courses and scholarships for academics under risk. Similar programmes have been launched in France and England. In Germany, the foundation process of the BAK–Germany association has been completed; its aim is to organise financial solidarity as well as other academic and political projects in the future. In addition, the Berlin Solidarity Academy is about to establish the Institution of Peace for Academics. Off-University is another solidarity institution, an online education portal where academics who were discharged in Turkey can lecture, and that provides a contribution to producing critical knowledge (Kaya, 2017).

Even though there are such strong solidarity actions at both national and international levels, after the scholarships are over, the back of the medallion will become visible. A significant number of academics who are in exile will take their place in an academic labour market as an immigrant, flexible and cheap labour source under competitive, free-market conditions. This will happen unless international solidarity campaigns and organised struggle will be started for a better academia, and of course, for a better world.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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