

Conquest of Universities

All in One Look

Political authorities in Turkey, seeing free thought, academic autonomy and independence - which are a must for science - always as obstacles, have frequently clashed with scientists. That is why, high education politics were shaped in an authoritarian perspective, while bans, dismissals and penalties always existed. With the High Education Council (YÖK) regime that was established by September 12 coup organisers, such policies gained a corporate and continuous identity. The tutelage at universities continues after those promising to change it have come into power and forgotten their promises. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) was no exception in this, despite the promises it made in the first years of its ruling. Furthermore, pressure against universities reached dimensions that multiplied coup periods. Below you will find a summary of how this process occurred, step by step.

- **2002, November 3:** AKP comes into power alone after the general elections. ([Details](#))
- **2004, July 14:** The application to have a soldier member at the High Education Council (YÖK) ended.
- **2008:** Many new universities were opened so there were at least one in every province. However, the quality of education decreased significantly. In 2019, there are 73 foundation universities and 129 universities in Turkey. ([Details](#))
- **2007, August 28:** With an AKP member President coming into power, the ruling party seizes caderisation opportunities at universities and at YÖK. ([Details](#))
- **2010, October 5:** 2 years after the Constitutional amendment that passed the Parliament in 2008 but was revoked by the Constitutional Court, the headscarf ban at universities was revoked with a YÖK circular. ([Details](#))
- **2008-2011:** With legal amendments, the central positions of the execution and the now-under-control YÖK were strengthened. Serious restrictions were brought against the personnel rights of universities. ([Details](#)) Political preferences replaced scientific criteria in the assignments and promotions of academics. ([Details](#)) Even the authority to assign members to the Turkish Sciences Academy, which had scientific, administrative and financial autonomy, was transferred to the government and the YÖK. ([Details](#))
- **2013, November 7:** With amendments in the Disciplinary Regulations, distributing notices at universities were considered within criminal activity and students were prevented from entering universities during investigations against them. ([Details](#)) Afterwards, campuses were turned into continuous police stations, the police was given limitless search authorities inside schools. Investigations were opened against oppositional elements at the academia. The YÖK did not allow universities to use the staff positions and prevented assignments. Erdoğan did his best to not assign rector candidates backed by almost the entire university during rector elections.
- **2016, January 10:** Investigations started against academics making peace calls, following the order of Erdoğan. ([Details](#)) Some were dismissed or forced to resign with Statutory Decrees issued within the State of Emergency. They were prosecuted separately within hundreds of lawsuits filed separately against them, sentenced to imprisonment due to “making illegal organisation propaganda.”
- **2016, July 23 - 2018, July 8:** With [Statutory Decrees](#) issued within the State of Emergency, 15 foundation universities were shut down and 6081 academics were

dismissed. All deans were forced to resign and university administrations have changed completely. ([Details](#))

- **2016, October 29:** With a Statutory Decree issued within the State of Emergency following Erdoğan's order, rectorate elections were revoked. Erdoğan has become the sole and last decider in the determination of university administrations. ([Details](#))
- **2018, February 22:** After Erdoğan's order, YÖK and the Parliament took action and Assistant Professorship was revoked. Around 36 thousand academic personnel became professors instantly. ([Details](#))
- **2018, September 13:** With a Presidential decree, the three-year professorship condition for rectors was revoked. ([Details](#))

Background

The transition in 1933 from the Ottoman Universities (Darülfünun) to universities was an important step for the aim to “*create ‘legitimate’ citizens for the newly-established national government*” of Republican elites. Doors were opened to many scientists fleeing from Hitler's Germany, steps were taken so that universities are “modernised”. However, since those governing the country had no intention to tolerate free thought, they frequently clashed with academics. This situation continues since the transitions presented as “reforms” in 1933. Academic autonomy and independence have always been seen as obstacles by the government. The society in general, and as a natural result of this, universities in private were shaped to be compliant with the system, aimed at obedience and monotypical. Academics who question, criticise the government and the society within the scientific framework were declared “communists,” “traitors” and “terrorists” (!) without exception.

Coming into power in 1950, Menderes humiliated professors criticising him by calling them “those in dark robes.” After the coup in 1960, junta members eliminated 147 academics. Afterwards, eliminations in the academics continued with periodical military coups. The military intervention in 1971 eliminated the autonomy at universities even further. With the Law of Universities enacted in 1973, the aim of universities was directed to “national” values. However, the greatest blow was with the military regime of September 12, 1980.

After the September 12 coup, the National Security Council made an amendment on the Martial Law No. 1402 dated 1971 and assigned the commands the authority to dismiss public officers. As thousands of public workers were dismissed, the name “1402”ers was used more for faculty members dismissed from universities. This incident became the widest elimination applied at Turkish universities with political reasons, until the State of Emergency declared in 2016. The coup organisers not only eliminated “leftist” faculty members at universities but established a structure to administer universities from one center. Universities were bound to the central authority of the Higher Education Council (YÖK).

With the postmodern coup of February 28, 1997, eliminations continued at universities. This time, the target was religious groups. These eliminations were made with the pressure of the military and turned into a civil character in the following years of the AKP administration, reaching dimensions that weren't seen ever before. The AKP rearranged the entire institutional structure over time, with a tendency of centralisation and authoritarianism under the allegation of being “against tutelage” - in the meantime, rebuilding old “tutelage” institutions for itself. Policies in high education as well as the universities being “put in line” through the hand of the government continues.

YÖK: The permanent institute of September 12

Wanting to discipline universities, the September 12 administration extended the authorities of the “First YÖK” that was established in 1973 but was annulled by the Constitutional Court, with the [Law of Higher Education No. 2547](#) enacted on November 6, 1981. Coup organisers created an institutional structure for the universities under strict monitoring and control of the political authority. Academic freedom and autonomy were completely removed and a system was built that led to all decisions being taken in Ankara in a centralised way.

The law defined in detail how the university will be and how university students will be raised as “citizens” carrying specific values and principles; the government determined the kind of information to be produced by the academics and its limits. The YÖK possessed the entire authority, including the dismissal of faculty members from profession. The criteria of “assignment” replaced “election” in the selection of university administrations. Deans were selected by the YÖK among the candidates suggested by the rector under a hierarchic order, and rectors were selected by the President among four candidates suggested by the YÖK.

After the military regime that YÖK was a product of ended, it always became a focus of debates and its revocation took place among the promises of almost all political parties during every election period. However, since 1981 and despite more than 40 legal amendments, the government didn't give up on its regulation over universities.

With the regulation brought in 1992, an election process was brought in the determination of university administrators. According to it, six rector candidates receiving the most votes, determined by universities with elections, are taken down to three by the YÖK and the President assigned one of the remaining three names. However, YÖK didn't carry the candidate receiving the most number of votes to the first place in its suggestion list, and the elections had no relation to the assignment decision of the President. As the hierarchical continues with the YÖK and the President assigns the rector, the rector assigns the deans and the deans assign faculty heads, the elections no longer have any meaning.

In conclusion, with bureaucratic networks of monitoring and pressure mechanisms, universities could never be free, even on paper. YÖK Chairman and the rectors continued to apply “disciplinary terror” against academics not complying with their order and ideas, as well as against students demanding scientific education and organisation freedom - even scientific meetings and conferences were banned when YÖK didn't approve them.

The YÖK is a product of the military coup and has fulfilled its “duty” during the February 28 post-modern coup as well. The universities took their part in the heavy attacks started against the conservatives with the pressure of the military. Students wearing headscarves weren't allowed inside universities, convincing rooms were established and they were forced to remove their scarves. Those who weren't convinced had to end their education or leave the country to continue their education. The period's YÖK Chairman Kemal Gürbüz described his mission as the *“cleansing of universities.”*

Years with the AKP

In 2002, the sole ruling AKP's Government programme and Urgent Action Plan announced extensive changes in the higher education system. YÖK members no longer involved a soldier, however, the removal of the headscarf ban took a lot of time. With new universities opened, there were no longer a province without a university in Turkey after six years of work - however, there were many institutions called universities but had nothing to do with creating science.

Between the years 2002 and 2010, amendments were made in the Law of Higher Education for 15 times, in the Law of Higher Education Personnel once, in the Law of Higher Education Institutions Organisation No. 2809 19 times. However, there was almost a war of power between YÖK, rectors and the political ruling on universities.

The ruling power's attitude on the YÖK changed entirely with Abdullah Gül being elected as President and the YÖK Chairman became a person selected by the ruling power. With new rector assignments, the government took the entire higher education under control. Thus, despite what AKP had previously defended in its first years, the YÖK was rebuilt and continued its "tutelage" on universities, with its central power increasing even further. It was protected against checks and balances mechanisms. After the Constitutional voting on September 12, 2010, the YÖK started to ignore the Council of State decrees as well.

As universities were fastly eliminated from oppositional or potentially oppositional staff, the effect of academic juries decreased in the assignment and promotion of faculty members. The authority to assign members to the [Turkish Sciences Academy \(TÜBA\)](#), which had scientific, administrative and financial autonomy, was transferred to the YÖK in August 2011. Around the same time, employing research members at universities was bound to the central system ([The Faculty Member Training Programme - ÖYP](#)).

In order to keep students, who were always seen as threats, under control, almost a military discipline was applied against the students as well as the intense pressure applied against academics who didn't want to obey this structure. Investigations were opened against 48,269 students between the years 2000 and 2012. 34,818 students facing investigations were penalised.

As these investigations spread more and more, in the last days of 2012, Prime Minister Erdoğan visited the Middle East Technical University to face protests. The police intervention against these protests injured many students. Erdoğan congratulated the police and targeted faculty members supporting students. Immediately afterwards, the YÖK took action. 13 university rectors reprimanded the students and lectured them on how to make a "pro-government protest" (!).

In 2013, an amendment was made in the [Student Disciplinary Regulations](#) that involved even distributing leaflets at the university within criminal activity, and which could prevent students from entering the university as investigations against them were ongoing. Only a day earlier, the period's YÖK Chairman launched an "Academic Freedom Notice" and complained about the increasing student protests, saying, "*We couldn't resist the demands to extend the disciplinary regulations that were coming intensely from the rectorates.*" As university administrations put themselves in the places of prosecutors and judges, they used to suspend students due to their social media posts and expelled some due to "illegal organisation membership" based on accusations that couldn't even be proven by courts.

In the same period, Erdoğan “congratulated” (!) that the police will be on duty in the universities. With an [Interior Ministry circular](#), it was ordered for the police to be on duty 24 hours around university campuses and for rectors to hold meetings with governors and security directors before the new academic session. Afterwards, schools started turning into police stations and university administrations gave limitless search authority to the police. Erdoğan declared that the universities are training students as “*book-filled donkeys*” and that universities are “*against national values.*”

According to the [report](#) we prepared last year, there are around 70,000 students who are enrolled and are either arrested or convicted. Thus, the number of arrested or convicted students in 2018 is more than the total number of those arrested and convicted in Turkey 16 years ago!

In the academics, pressures continued against oppositional elements that didn’t bow down to the ruling power. For instance, the YÖK didn’t allow the use of staff space at Boğaziçi University, prevented appointments and intentionally left them unassigned. In 2016, Gülay Barbarosoğlu was elected with a record number of support, that was 89 percent of all votes in the rectorate elections. However, she wasn’t appointed as rector for months by Erdoğan only. In the end, rectorate elections were revoked and Erdoğan appointed someone as rector to Boğaziçi University instead of Barbarosoğlu - someone who hasn’t even participated in the elections. The Middle East Technical University was also frequently targeted by Erdoğan and every time, the YÖK took action with an order from Erdoğan. Ankara University Rectorate started an investigation against Political Sciences Faculty Dean Yalçın Karatepe (who protected his oppositional identity with his work and statements) due to “giving an opportunity to terrorist organisations for them to gain dominance in the faculty” (!).

After Erdoğan became the President of the Republic, the Academic Session’s Opening Ceremony also started to be held at the Presidential Palace. In the first ceremony in 2016, Erdoğan gave a speech in front of YÖK members as well as the rectors and senate members of 181 universities, demanding for the rectorate elections to be revoked. Soon after, he did exactly that. Not minding the university elections in 29 of the 74 rectors he appointed since August 2014, the time he was elected as President of the Republic, Erdoğan now became the sole power in the determination of university administrations.

Academics for Peace

With the negotiations started as the “Resolution Process” for the Kurdish Question remaining inconclusive, the clashes started once again since July 2015. Consecutive curfews were declared in Kurdish provinces. A group of academics launched a petition, entitled, “*We Will Not Partake In This Crime,*” in January 2016 against the human rights violations committed during the military operations and clashes in the provinces. 1128 academics from 89 universities have signed the petition, demanding for the violence to end and calling for peace. Soon after, more than 1800 academics from all around the world declared that they stand beside their colleagues in Turkey.

President Erdoğan described the signatories as **“so-called academics” and “fake intellectuals”**, accusing them with being in “treason” and calling the judiciary and rectors to take action. The YÖK said, **“What needs to be done will be done.”** As the academics became targets for lynch campaigns, they faced administrative and judicial investigations. Tens of academics were detained and four scientists were arrested due to sharing the petition with the public on behalf of the signatories.

406 signatory academics were soon dismissed from profession with Statutory Decrees issued within the State of Emergency. 89 were dismissed and 99 were forced to either resign or retire. Prosecutions against them were divided into many lawsuits filed in separate courts. Lawsuits against 204 of the 788 academics prosecuted in 59 different courts were concluded by August 2019, and all were sentenced to imprisonment varying from 15 to 36 months due to “making illegal organisation propaganda” or “aiding an illegal organisation.” 36 decrees of conviction weren’t deferred. The first academic to be imprisoned was Prof. Dr Füsün Üstel.

After more than three years, the Constitutional Court issued a decree of “freedom of expression violation” on July 26, 2019. As the penalties issued in hundreds of cases became null and void, rectors took action once again. Ağrı İbrahim Çeçen, İstanbul Aydın, Altınbaş and İstanbul Medeniyet University rectorates sent a notice to deans and deans sent the same notice to faculty heads, demanding the notice to be signed by academics. The notice was entitled, “Constitutional Court can not Legitimise Terror.” İstanbul, İzmir Dokuz Eylül, Yıldız Technical, İstanbul Technical, Gazi and Anadolu University rectorates launched similar statements.

State of Emergency at Universities

The State of Emergency was declared after the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016 and was used as a weapon against everyone who opposed the ruling and searched for their rights, unrelated to the reason it was declared. The State of Emergency was extended seven times and remained effective for two years without break. With the State of Emergency, the country was governed with Statutory Decrees outside the monitoring of the judiciary and legislation. During that period, the universities took their part from the hundreds of amendments made in 154 law articles.

Calling rectors for an urgent meeting, YÖK Chairman stated, *“We salute our Chief Commander, our President of the Republic, with respect.”* According to YÖK, *“Raising patriotic generations was above and in front of all values.”* Four days after the coup attempt, the YÖK demanded the resignations of 1577 deans from 1176 public and 401 foundation universities. All deans **resigned** on July 20. With a statement made on July 29, the YÖK announced that 2300 academic personnel were **suspended** in the two-week period, including four rectors.

15 foundation universities were shut down and 6081 academics were dismissed from their positions at universities with Statutory Decrees declared within the State of Emergency. The YÖK indicated that they *“carry the sensitivities of the government exactly and without being bound to time against all structures and terrorist organisations posing a threat against national security,”* announcing that the dismissals made with Statutory Decrees were conducted by committees established at universities.

The revocation of rectorate elections has come into the agenda under the conditions of the State of Emergency as well. The regulation was enacted on October 29, 2016 with [Statutory Decree No. 676](#). Now the YÖK would make announcements for candidates, in which it asked their “visions” and “missions” and it now sends three candidates selected among the applicants to Erdoğan for assignment. In case Erdoğan doesn’t like the candidates and in case YÖK doesn’t suggest a new candidate within two weeks, Erdoğan may make an assignment directly.

With a speech he gave in July 2017, Erdoğan called the YÖK Chairman and said, [“What is it with Assistant Professorship?”](#) stating that assistant professorship must be revoked. The regulation was fast in action and around 36 thousand assistant professors instantly became professors.

Together with the State of Emergency, universities in Turkey left even coup administrations behind and entered in the darkest time of their history. The academics’ crimes were decided without a judicial decree, with taggings, intelligence reports and slanders - thousands were eliminated from universities with arbitrary processes.

With a [Presidential decree](#), amendments were made on higher education personnel as well. The three-year professorship condition for rectors and at least five-year public service condition for TUBITAK executive council membership were revoked.

With amendments made within the Higher Education Law at the Parliament, some faculties of old, established universities like Istanbul, Gazi, İnönü, Anadolu, Selçuk, Erciyes Universities were separated despite all reactions from academic staff and students. A [law was enacted](#) that predicted 20 new universities to be established, 13 of which would be through the division of current universities and for the names of 14 universities to be changed. Furthermore, the YÖK’s control over foundation universities was increased.

Conclusion

Academics in Turkey have been under the control and monitoring of the Higher Education Council (YÖK) for the last 39 years. Being one of the most permanent institutions of the September 12 military regime, the YÖK’S existence remains even though political actors change. All legislation, including Constitutional and legal regulations, continue to be re-regulated in accordance with the existing political aims and preferences, being recreated. In this structure, the YÖK is almost a subcontractor for political ruling and the universities a subcontractor for the YÖK. In this state of matters, it’s impossible for universities to achieve academic and scientific autonomy.