

ROUNDTABLE: DISPLACED SCHOLARS AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Democratic Backsliding and Universities: Between Control and Resilience

Selin Bengi Gumrukcu

Department of Political Science, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, USA
Email: bengigumrukcu@gmail.com

A third wave of autocratization is manifest today.¹ Universities are no exception to the institutions that are affected by democratic backsliding in a given country: according to the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project, academic freedom has declined by 13 percent in autocratizing countries in the 2010–20 period, whereas almost no change has been recorded in other countries.²

Authoritarian endurance strategies include repression, legitimation, and co-optation.³ The purpose of repression, which can be overt or covert, is to increase the costs for potential challengers and so deter antiregime activities. Legitimation, on the other hand, is a process of achieving “active consent, compliance with the rules, passive obedience, or mere toleration within the population.”⁴ Finally, co-optation refers to the concessions and benefits provided to the public or the elites by the rulers to consolidate or broaden their voter base and political support. In other words, the rulers exchange potential challengers’ loyalty with benefits. Although these strategies are mostly discussed with regard to formal institutional design, elections, and overt repression against the opposition, it also is of crucial importance to look at informal arenas. For example, advanced education is considered a social and political opportunity for potential opposition, and therefore targeting of higher education by autocratizing countries should not be a surprise. Although hindering public access to higher education is listed as an authoritarian strategy in this sense, this is not always how the story goes.⁵ Introducing the concept of “educated acquiescence,” Elizabeth Perry, for example, discusses how some authoritarian regimes “actively support and shape institutions and operations of higher education with an eye toward winning the allegiance of the intelligentsia and thereby prolonging their reign,” conceptualizing the university as an institution active

¹ Anna Lührmann and Staffan I. Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization Is Here: What Is New about It?” *Democratization* 26, no. 7 (2019): 1095–1113.

² The V-Dem project is an international effort to produce a novel method for conceptualizing and gauging democracy for all countries since 1900. Unlike conventional approaches that rely on a singular dimension such as the existence of elections, the V-Dem framework incorporates multiple dimensions and disaggregated data that more accurately reflect the intricacies of democratic systems. At the core of the V-Dem project are five high-level democratic features: electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian. Anna Lührmann, Seraphine F. Maerz, Sandra Grahn, et al., *Autocratization Surges: Resistance Grows; Democracy Report 2020* (Gothenberg, Sweden: Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2020), 20.

³ See, for example, Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, “Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats,” *Comparative Political Studies* 40, no. 11 (2007): 1279–1301; Johannes Gerschewski, “The Three Pillars of Stability: Legitimation, Repression, and Co-optation in Autocratic Regimes,” *Democratization* 20, no. 1 (2013): 13–38.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and George W. Downs, “Development and Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5 (2005): 83.

in facilitating authoritarian legitimation and therefore endurance.⁶ The fact that the universities are usually under direct government control in such regimes contributes to this situation, despite constitutionally embedded concepts like freedom of speech, academic freedom, or university autonomy.

With its significantly declining democracy, despite steady economic growth until recently, lack of sizable natural resources, high state capacity, and links with the West, Turkey presents a good case study of democratic backsliding and authoritarian endurance.⁷ Although until the early 2010s Turkey under the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, or AKP) rule was referred to “as a successful model of reconciling Islam, democracy and the market economy,” Turkey’s not-so-consolidated democracy began to reverse, especially during the AKP government’s second term following the 2007 elections.⁸ Academia and academic freedoms were not exempt from this process, as the democratic backsliding and the use of laws to undermine freedoms had an unprecedented impact on higher education in the country.⁹ According to data from V-Dem, the level of academic freedom in the country has been in decline since 2009, well before the infamous case of Academics for Peace, and as of 2016 it reached the level of the early 1980s, the period following the 1980 military coup.

As academic freedom is intrinsically linked to the rule of law and fundamental rights, I aim here to locate the decline of academic freedoms in Turkey within the broader debate on democracy and rule of law in the country.

Democratic Backsliding and Abusive Constitutionalism in Turkey

When the AKP came to power in 2002, many had high hopes for democratization in the country. This was not a groundless expectation based on people’s hunger for democracy; on the contrary, the party established this expectation itself on several occasions, one being its first party program, titled “Development and Democratization” (*Kalkınma ve Demokratikleşme*). Appealing to liberals and moderate Islamists in the country with a populist tone, and without denying secularism, the party promised to democratize the country regarding human rights, the Kurdish issue, local administration, and the judiciary, while also recognizing the right to demonstrate.

The party succeeded in keeping its promises, at least in the initial years of rule. Several reform packages were passed, mostly thanks to EU conditionality. As a strategy of gaining legitimacy, these reform packages regulated the judiciary, abolished the death penalty and, most significantly, weakened the military’s overinvolvement in civilian politics. For most parties, this was the end of military tutelage in the country.

Although there is no consensus in the literature on the exact period when the AKP’s populism took an authoritarian turn, some argue that it commenced during the party’s second term, which party leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan refers to as an “apprentice period” (*kalfalık dönemi*). By 2010, the ruling AKP was able to pass amendments to the 1982 Constitution and change the structure of the high judiciary in the country as a result of a referendum. The concept of “abusive constitutionalism” highlights the use of mechanisms of constitutional change by authoritarian leaders or those seeking autocratic power to significantly undermine democratic processes within a state.¹⁰ By leveraging these mechanisms, authoritarian populist leaders can exploit legal systems to remove checks and balances on executive power, thereby consolidating their own rule and impeding the electorate’s ability to change

⁶ Elizabeth J. Perry, “Educated Acquiescence: How Academia Sustains Authoritarianism in China,” *Theory and Society* 49 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-019-09373-1>.

⁷ Oksan Bayulgen, Ekim Arbatli, and Sercan Canbolat, “Elite Survival Strategies and Authoritarian Reversal in Turkey,” *Polity* 50, no. 3 (2018): 333–65.

⁸ Filiz Başkan Canyas, F. Orkunt Canyas, and Selin Bengi Gümrükçü, “Turkey’s 2015 Parliamentary Elections,” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 18, no. 1 (2015): 77–89.

⁹ Ayşe Kadioğlu, “Autocratic Legalism in New Turkey,” *Social Research* 88, no. 2, 459.

¹⁰ David Landau, “Abusive Constitutionalism,” *U. C. Davis Law Review* 189 (2013): 195.

the government. In Turkey, the 2010 constitutional amendments represented a critical turning point in this regard, as they enabled the government to exercise greater control over the high judiciary, effectively allowing the executive to dominate this branch of government. As a result, unconstitutionality became normalized and eventually legitimized, degrading the constitution and undermining its authority.

The AKP, especially after the above-mentioned amendments, became increasingly aggressive in promoting its social and cultural agenda. One major example was the stated desire to raise a “pious youth” (*dindar nesil*), unlike the Westernized, and therefore alienated, youth, a process which would heavily rely on education. In another example in early May 2013, the government banned advertisements for alcohol, and banned shops from selling alcohol between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. It was under these circumstances that the Gezi Park protests emerged in late May 2013 and evolved into a mass mobilization against neoliberal authoritarianism in the country under the AKP. The government response to the protests was repression, which took the form of police brutality against the protesters, legal repression with political trials targeting the opposition, and organizing counterprotests.¹¹

Although authoritarianism has been “embedded in the Turkish neoliberal experience,” it became more discretionary, especially after the failed coup attempt in the summer of 2016, when the concept of “governmental decrees” (*Kanun Hükmünde Kararname*, KHK) became a part of daily life in Turkey.¹² The KHKs became the new tool of passing laws under the subsequent emergency rule, during which repression reached a significant level as the KHKs were used to purge and arrest thousands of public employees on terrorism charges. Finally, a constitutional referendum held in 2017, under the emergency rule, switched the political system in the country from a parliamentary to a presidential one. In line with these developments, Freedom House, for example, has considered Turkey “not free” since 2018, for the first time since the 1980 military coup.

It is suggested, based on V-Dem data for several countries which have experienced democratic backsliding in recent years, that crackdowns on formal institutions, such as elections, come after decimating the informal ones, such as media and civil society. However, the same data suggest that the level of academic freedom decline in Turkey surpassed the decline of the level of liberal democracy between 2000 and 2016, with the latter starting to decline before the former.

Control: Repression and Academic Freedom in Turkey

The level of academic freedom, according to these data, starts to decline around 2009, with serious blows in 2013 (after the Gezi Park protests) and especially in 2016 (after the failed coup attempt). A quick look at the interventions by the Middle East Studies Association’s Committee of Academic Freedom addressing Turkey confirms this trend: only eight of the eighty interventions were issued before 2009 period.¹³ This might mean there was a more subtle intervention in the universities before this period, shaped around more individual, isolated, and less-publicized cases; or, based on the degree of financial, administrative, and political government control over the universities through the Higher Education Council (Yüksek Öğretim Kurumu, YÖK), the government did not see the universities as a significant threat to its rule before the 2013 period. Indeed, although some scholars have been “organizing since 2009 against government attacks on research, teaching, translation, and publication,” and some of the scholarly work on Turkish politics started to take on a more critical tone with the AKP’s election to a third term in office in 2011, the university

¹¹ Selin Bengi Gumrukcu, “Populist Discourse, (Counter-)Mobilizations and Democratic Backsliding in Turkey,” *Turkish Studies* 23, no. 2 (2022): 407–29.

¹² Sümercan Bozkurt-Güngen, “Labour and Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Changes and Continuities under the AKP Governments in Turkey,” *South European Society and Politics* 23, no. 2 (2018): 230.

¹³ This was as of November 2022. See Middle East Studies Association, “Committee on Academic Freedom,” <https://mesana.org/advocacy/committee-on-academic-freedom/-/-/turkey> (accessed 23 November 2022).

campuses were mostly tranquil, with the major exception of universities like the Middle East Technical University. However, the situation changed with the mass Gezi Park protests, organized in eighty of eighty-one cities.¹⁴ According to Konda, 37 percent of the protestors in Gezi Park in Istanbul were students.¹⁵ This activism did not remain unnoticed, and the YÖK investigated students and faculty members who supported or attended the protests.¹⁶ According to the Initiative for Solidarity with Detained Students, the number of detained and convicted students reached 2,800 in 2013, and the number of students arrested in the 2013–17 period increased twenty-five-fold.¹⁷ In addition, in 2013, the Higher Education Loans and Dormitories Institution (Kredi Yurtlar Kurumu, KYK), responsible for public grants and loans to students, amended their eligibility criteria to exclude those involved in activities deemed disruptive, including resistance, boycotts, occupations, vandalism, and chanting slogans.¹⁸

The Gezi Park protests also triggered activism by academics. During the protests, for example, a major public sector union, namely the Confederation of Public Employees Trade Unions, organized a one-day work stoppage in support of the Gezi protesters, after which several academics were subjected to disciplinary processes. The situation turned into a witch hunt, according to the Union of Education and Science Workers.¹⁹ Academics who supported protests, such as by delaying exams, were reported to university officials by “informant citizens” and subsequently faced disciplinary proceedings, resulting in the termination of some faculty members.²⁰

Although the grip on academic freedoms tightened after the Gezi Park protests, the major blow came after the failed coup attempt and the following emergency rule, which lasted for three years. At the macro level, universities went through structural changes. Several thousand academics, mostly the signatories of the Academics for Peace petition, asking for a halt to security operations in the southeast of Turkey, were expelled from their jobs, and fifteen universities were shut down. This can be read in the framework of abusive constitutionalism: the KHKs, which normally can only regulate matters that are related to a given state of emergency, were used by the AKP government to regulate matters far beyond their stated purposes, including TV shows. The Constitutional Court, whose structure had been significantly changed with the above-mentioned constitutional amendments, remained silent about these irregularities despite the efforts of the main opposition party. Since 2016, thanks to Article 85 of KHK no. 676, which canceled elections for the rector in public universities, the President of the Republic has had full authority to appoint rectors.²¹ Overriding the institutional autonomy of the universities provided by the constitution raised the question of appointment according to political loyalty, as opposed to merit. Indeed, current events at Boğaziçi University started after the appointment of Melih Bulu—who was not a faculty member and had unsuccessfully run for a parliamentary seat in 2015—as rector by President Erdoğan in early 2021. Similar moves were seen at law schools, with most new

¹⁴ Berna Turam, “Turkey under the AKP: Are Rights and Liberties Safe?” *Journal of Democracy* 23, no. 1 (2012): 112.

¹⁵ Konda, “Gezi Parki Arastirmasi,” <https://konda.com.tr/report/121/gezi-report?l=en> https://konda.com.tr/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/KONDA_GeziParkiArastirmasi.pdf (accessed 21 May 2022).

¹⁶ Asli Igsiz, “Gezi Park Protests Resonate in Turkish Academe,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2 July 2012, <https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/worldwise/gezi-park-protests-resonate-in-turkish-academe>. (accessed 19 May 2022)

¹⁷ “Binlerce öğrenci cezaevinde,” *Cumhuriyet*, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/binlerce-ogrenci-cezaevinde-21623> (accessed 31 May 2022) “Cezaevlerindeki öğrenci sayısı 4 yılda 25 kat arttı,” *Cumhuriyet*, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/cezaevlerindeki-ogrenci-sayisi-4-yilda-25-kat-artti-821581> (accessed 31 May 2022).

¹⁸ “Kılıç: Eylemci öğrencinin bursu kesilmeyecek,” T24, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/kilic-eylemci-ogrencinin-bursu-kesilmeyecek,235730> (accessed 31 May 2022)

¹⁹ “Üniversitelerde Gezi avı,” *Sözcü*, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2013/gundem/universitelerde-gezi-avi-390970> (accessed 23 May 2022).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ The AKP itself pledged democratic elections at the universities in their first electoral manifesto back in 2002.

deans not having law degrees.²² In addition, with changes to the Law on the Higher Education Council in 2020, academics could be formally reprimanded for acts against public morals (Article 53). Such vague references related to disciplinary practices can be expected to strengthen the hand of the administration and weaken scholars.

The impact of increasing authoritarianism can be assessed by the number of displaced scholars, those who have left the country in the face of criminal charges, and those facing other blocks to furthering their academic careers. Research and data concerning these scholars are limited, but some observations can be drawn based on narratives and experiences, as well as some recent research. Scholars who “exited,” to use Hirschman’s terminology, may have difficulties adjusting to their host country’s language, culture, social lifestyles, and academic culture and classroom environment.²³ In particular, the fear that are being tracked politically can still be an obstacle to academic freedom.²⁴ Displaced scholars, particularly junior academics, may experience additional emotional distress as they strive for recognition in their new social and academic environments, which can impede research and publishing efforts. Seçkin Özdemir’s recent research, which involved in-depth interviews with “at-risk scholars” from Turkey in Europe, revealed that “safe research spaces and public services, while provided on a temporary basis, do not guarantee access to the public academic sphere in which exiled scholars can freely appear.”²⁵ These scholars also face a sense of limbo and lack of belonging in their host country, which can diminish their motivation to settle there, and uncertainty regarding the possibility of returning home further exacerbates this feeling.²⁶ At home, democratic backsliding has implications for those scholars who are currently working in academic institutions in Turkey. It is suggested that “with intensified autocratization, scholars’ prerogatives to conduct research freely and to teach independent of political concerns increasingly come under attack.”²⁷ According to a recent study, some formal institutions, such as the Presidential Communication Center (Cumhurbaşkanlığı İletişim Merkezi), founded in 2018, play an important role in enhancing self-censorship among academics in the country: “Everything taught in class risks being transmitted to this institution. Academics are surveilled and controlled through systems and institutions of surveillance. Not surprisingly, this has caused self-censorship among academics.”²⁸ It also is noted that some scholars are, for example, omitting some of their publications on “sensitive” issues from their curriculum vitae when applying to a position, and some students are reframing their dissertation’s title for it to be approved by YÖK. This does not sound surprising, given the most recent example of a PhD dissertation accepted in the US not being recognized in Turkey, allegedly because it referred to rising authoritarianism in Turkey in its title.²⁹

²² Kemal Gözler, “Hukukçu Olmayan Hukuk Dekanları. Türkiye’de Bazı Hukuk Fakültelerine Hukukçu Olmayan Dekan Atanması Hakkında Eleştiriler,”

²³ Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

²⁴ Berna Turam, “Turkey’s Final Exam on Freedom: Boğaziçi University Fights the Authoritarian Regime,” *Social Research* 88, no. 2 (2021): 587–681.

²⁵ Seçkin Sertdemir Özdemir, “Pity the Exiled: Turkish Academics in Exile; The Problem of Compassion in Politics and the Promise of Dis-Exile,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34, no. 1, (2021): 9–10, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fey076>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Lührmann et al., *Autocratization Surges*, 20.

²⁸ Sevgi Doğan and Ervjola Selenica, “Authoritarianism and Academic Freedom in Neoliberal Turkey,” *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 20, no. 2 (2022): 172.

²⁹ “ABD’de yazılan doktora tezi Türkiye’de reddedildi . . . Gerekçe: Tez konusu ve içeriği,” *Gazete Duvar*, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/abdde-yazilan-doktora-tezi-turkiyede-reddedildi-gerekce-tez-konusu-ve-icerigi-haber-1533327> (accessed 31 May 2022).

Legitimation and Co-optation: Aspirations for Cultural Hegemony and Massification of Higher Education

This structural transformation with macro and micro level effects is coupled with “massification” in higher education. As of October 2021, there were 208 higher education institutions (including seventy-five private universities and four private vocational schools) in Turkey, up from seventy-seven in 2002, meaning more than 60 percent of the universities in the country have been opened during AKP governments.³⁰ With this increase in the number of higher educational institutions, the number of students enrolled in undergraduate programs on a yearly basis also has doubled, from around 455,000 in 2001 to 815,000 in 2021.³¹ As of 2021, there were about 7.8 million students enrolled in two-year and four-year undergraduate programs in the country, up from 1.9 million in 2005.³² In addition, the number of teaching faculty has increased from around 82,000 in the 2004–5 academic year to around 180,000 in 2020–22.³³ According to the chair of the Union of Scholars, 40 percent of the existing academic and administrative staff of the universities have been shaped under the AKP governments.³⁴ Indeed, the AKP’s aspirations for building a new cultural hegemony in the country have been shaped especially around youth and education policies. However, the AKP government has failed to produce the desired cultural hegemony, as the universities have remained institutionally almost deserted, especially after the mass expulsion, despite all the new hires. It was reported in 2020, for example, that 273 departments in seventy-eight public universities did not have any assistants, associates, or full professors, and 1,694 departments operated with five scholars only.³⁵ The main pillar of academic productivity, the number of publications, has slowed down since 2006.³⁶ In addition, with amendments in the law, several criteria for the appointment and promotion procedures of academics have been changed. For example, in 2018, the necessary minimum grade on a central foreign language test was decreased from 65/100 to 55/100.³⁷ The elimination of the requirement for full professorship experience of at least three years for rector appointments in 2018 led to a marked decline in the scholarly qualifications of university rectors in Turkey. A 2019 study found that “23.8% of the rectors did not have any published articles covered by Scopus, and 34.5% did not have any articles covered by [Web of Science],” with a substantial proportion having no citations in either database.³⁸ This has resulted in Turkish universities ranking lower on global lists such as Times Higher Education. There also are rectors with open political affiliations; for example, former members of parliament or individuals from the ranks of the AKP who sought the positions to which they

³⁰ “2022 Yılı Cumhurbaşkanlığı Programı,” Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, <https://www.sbb.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/2022-Yili-Cumhurbaşkanlığı-Yıllık-Programı-26102021.pdf> (accessed 20 August 2023).

³¹ Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr> (accessed 23 May 2022).

³² Ibid.

³³ According to the data, almost 30 thousand academics were hired after the mass purges following the failed coup attempt. See Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Kategori/GetKategori?p=egitim-kultur-sporve-turizm-105&dil=1> (accessed 24 May 2022).

³⁴ “Erdoğan’ın ‘Üniversiteler özgür’ sözlerine akademisyenlerden tepki: Akademik özgürlük yok,” *Cumhuriyet*, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/erdoganin-universiteler-ozgur-sozlerine-akademisyenlerden-tepki-akademik-ozgurluk-yok-1849530> (accessed 25 May 2022).

³⁵ “Üniversite var ama akademisyen yok,” *Cumhuriyet*, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/universite-var-ama-akademisyen-yok-1537953> (accessd 24 May 2022).

³⁶ Ufuk Akçığıt and Elif Özcan-tok, “Türkiye Bilim Raporu,” Türkiye Bilimler Akademisi, 2020, <https://www.tuba.gov.tr/tr/yayinlar/suresiz-yayinlar/raporlar/turkiye-bilim-raporu-1> <https://www.tuba.gov.tr/files/yayinlar/raporlar/Turkiye%20Bilim%20Raporu.pdf> (accessed 25 May 2022).

³⁷ “Dil puanı barajını 65’ten 55’e düşüren YÖK, akademisyenleri dil için yurtdışına gönderecek,” T24, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/dil-puani-barajini-65ten-55e-dusuren-yok-akademisyenleri-dil-icin-yurtdisina-gonderecek,669791> (accessed 24 May 2022).

³⁸ Engin Karadag, “Academic (Dis)qualifications of Turkish Rectors: Their Career Paths, H-index, and the Number of Articles and Citations,” *Higher Education* 81 (2021): 310.

were appointed. Out of the twenty new rectors appointed by the president in August 2023, four had such affiliations.³⁹

The most recent decision of the Turkish government to mandate online education across the country following the 2023 earthquakes in the southeast of the country in February raised concerns regarding democratic backsliding and the decline of academic freedoms, as it may serve as a pretext to further curtail academic autonomy and limit critical engagement among students and faculty, especially before the May 2023 elections.⁴⁰ Allotment of the 800 state-run dorms to the earthquake survivors across the country led the students to empty them, leaving them in a precarious situation in which they had to return to their family homes, which might be in a different city. This raised concerns about the elections and where and how students, who are usually registered to vote at the location of their universities, would vote. To address the issue, the youth branch of the main opposition party started a campaign called “The Ticket for Democracy” (*Demokrasi Bileti*), which fundraised for students who would need to travel to a different city to vote but did not have the financial means to do so.⁴¹

Resilience: “We Do Not Accept, We Do Not Give Up”

Academics possess the capacity to resist authoritarianism by utilizing their expertise to challenge government policies, promote democratic values, and advocate for human rights. Throughout history, faculty members have decried a range of domestic issues, including right-wing higher education policies and global issues such as inequality, from the New Left of the 1960s to the Global Justice Movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s. In this respect, Turkey is no different. Although beyond the scope of this article, it is reasonable to assert that the activism of Turkish academics can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s, when universities became the primary locus of contention in society.⁴² Gündüz Vassaf, a scholar who resigned from his position at Boğaziçi University in the 1980s to protest the mass firings of left-leaning scholars under law no. 1402 (also known as *1402'likler* in Turkish), recounted how the faculty board at Boğaziçi opposed the military's demand in 1979 to admit military students with lower scores than the norm.⁴³ More recently, academics have played a prominent role in the emergence and progression of the Global Justice Movement in Turkey.⁴⁴

As a response to the constricting environment of academic freedom, academics took the initiative to establish alternative educational spaces, to generate and circulate scholarly knowledge and connect with the broader society. This led to the creation of the “free” or “critical” colleges, such as the ones established in the US in the mid-1960s under the auspices of Students for a Democratic Society.⁴⁵ These institutions were created to foster

³⁹ “Erdogan 20 universiteye rector atadi: AKP'li isimler dikkat cekti,” Diken, <https://www.diken.com.tr/erdogan-20-universiteye-rector-atadi> (accessed 1 August 2023).

⁴⁰ Eva Trout Powell and Laurie Brand, “Letter Regarding Closure of All Turkish Universities to In-Person Instruction Following Earthquakes,” Middle East Studies Association, Committee on Academic Freedom, 1 March 2023, <https://mesana.org/advocacy/committee-on-academic-freedom/2023/03/01/letter-regarding-closure-of-all-turkish-universities-to-in-person-instruction-following-earthquakes>.

⁴¹ “Demokrasi bileti nedir, nasıl alinir? Üniversite öğrencilerine otobüs bileti kampanyası,” CNNTürk, <https://www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/demokrasi-bileti-nedir-nasil-alinir-demokrasi-bileti-kampanyasi-sartlari> (accessed 31 July 2023).

⁴² Selin Bengi Gümrukçü, “Reconstructing a Cycle of Protest: Protest and Politics in Turkey, 1971–1985,” PhD diss., University of Zurich, 2014.

⁴³ “Üniversitedeki darbe: 1402'likler,” NTV, <https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/universitedeki-darbe-1402likler,7aZC1XJz6U-d1i0QGRjYAw> (accessed 14 March 2023).

⁴⁴ Selin Bengi Gümrukçü, “The Rise of a Social Movement: The Emergence of Anti-Globalization Movements in Turkey,” *Turkish Studies* 11, no. 2 (2010): 163–80.

⁴⁵ Susanne Schregel, “Introduction: Social Movements, Protest, and Academic Knowledge Formation; Interactions since the 1960s,” *Moving the Social* 60 (2018): 5–26.

intellectual freedom and experimentation, with the goal of creating alternative models for higher education. They provided a space for students and faculty to engage in interdisciplinary learning and critical inquiry outside of traditional academic structures. The emergence of these colleges was a significant development in the history of higher education, as they challenged the conventional model of education and advocated for a more democratic and participatory approach. In Turkey, a “free university” (Özgür Üniversite) was established in the early 1990s by an economist, Fikret Baskaya, aiming to create an alternative to the existing neoliberal higher education system in the country. Özgür Üniversite continues to operate today, by organizing seminars on various topics, as well as publishing a journal and several collaborative works.

A more recent example of the free university in Turkey is the “solidarity academies” (*Dayanışma Akademileri*) established by the “peace academics” who were dismissed from their positions at Turkish public and private universities by the KHKs. Organized in more than 10 cities as of 2021, the solidarity academies provide a venue for scholars to continue their scholarly work and produce and disseminate knowledge. Solidarity academies also organize several events, including free workshops and classes, creating an alternative venue for learning and teaching, but also allowing the dismissed academics to engage with society at large and safeguarding public access to critical research.⁴⁶ The solidarity academies also cultivate a sense of community by bringing together dismissed academics of various scholarly fields from different universities across the country who share the experience of state repression. These individuals may suffer from isolation and “civil death,” which refers to the severing of ties with broader society due to being labeled *KHK’liler* (a common reference to those who have been dismissed through the decree laws). By connecting individuals who share a similar experience of state repression, the solidarity academies offer a way for dismissed academics to rebuild social ties and combat the negative effects of their dismissal. By presenting “a[n] example of decentralized but interrelated collective action initiations among academics in Turkey,” solidarity academies have rejuvenated academic activism and resistance in Turkey.⁴⁷

The recent protests at Boğaziçi University provide a notable instance of academic activism in Turkey. On January 1, 2021, President Erdogan appointed Melih Bulu, an active politician in the AKP until around 2015, as the university’s rector. The appointment was met with concern by faculty and students due to Bulu’s lack of association with Boğaziçi, except for his education, and his political ties, among other reasons. The faculty and students quickly organized and began protesting, citing issues such as the absence of prior consultation and allegations of plagiarism. Originating in “the university’s advanced political skill, the mastery of political pluralism,” the protests not only underlined university autonomy, but also the increasing tendency to authoritarianism in Turkey, as the government has tried to establish a cultural hegemony.⁴⁸ Various actors, including government institutions, security forces, and counterprotesters, employed a range of repressive tactics to quash the students’ protests, such as stigmatization and criminalization through labels such as “terrorists” propagated by politicians and certain media outlets, police detainments and home raids, and counterprotests organized by pro-government organizations. Furthermore, the KYK withdrew the scholarships of some of the protesting students. The faculty’s form of protest was more symbolic and involved wearing their regalia and turning their backs to the

⁴⁶ See Esra Erdem and Kamuran Akın, “Emergent Repertoires of Resistance and Commoning in Higher Education: The Solidarity Academies Movement in Turkey,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 118, no. 1 (2019): 145–63, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-7281660>.

⁴⁷ Yasemin Gülsüm Acar and Canan Coşkan, “Academic Activism and Its Impact on Individual- Level Mobilization, Sources of Learning, and the Future of Academia in Turkey,” *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology* 30, no. 4 (2020): 392. At the international level, Off-University based in Berlin provides free and online education to those interested, bringing displaced scholars not only from Turkey but elsewhere in the region together, creating an international and open venue for knowledge dissemination.

⁴⁸ Turam, “Turkey’s Final Exam,” 591.

rectorate building while holding signs bearing the slogan, “We do not accept, we do not give up.” Despite the passage of more than two years since the initial protests, the faculty’s protest continues to this day.

Mobilizing their resources, the faculty, students, and alumni of the university effectively galvanized their efforts to engage with the international academic community. They did so by spearheading petitions, emailing their networks to raise awareness about the situation and call for solidarity, penning op-eds, and organizing panels to discuss the situation at Boğaziçi. It is worth noting that Boğaziçi University had been “relatively unscathed” by previous governmental decrees, allowing for the necessary resources and opportunities for the university to act.⁴⁹ As a consequence of the Boğaziçi resistance, the role of academics as social critics has, according to V-Dem data, increased for the first time since 2015.

Although the Boğaziçi protests have yet to achieve complete success in securing the university’s autonomy, it would be inaccurate to deem them entirely unsuccessful. In fact, they have served to showcase the possibility of cultivating democratic forms of opposition against authoritarian and arbitrary governance, even in the most adverse circumstances.⁵⁰ The final outcome of the ongoing conflict remains uncertain, as the May 2023 elections did not produce the desired outcome of the protesters.⁵¹ In their demonstration just two days before the first round of the elections on May 14, the faculty, accompanied by the students and the Education and Science Workers’ Union (Eğitim Sen), stated that regardless of the outcome they would continue to resist for their future, freedom, and life.⁵² The Boğaziçi resistance, which has instilled hope not only among academia but also among the general public in Turkey, and reignited the seeds of resilience following the Gezi Park demonstrations, particularly during the initial months of the protests, shows the possibility of durable protest under a competitive authoritarian regime.

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⁴⁹ Aysen Uysal, “Rektörler İktidara Biat Ettiği Sürece Koltuğunda Oturabiliyor,” interview by Mühdan Sağlam, *Gazete Duvar*, 4 February 2021, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/ayesen-uysal-rektorler-iktidara-biat-ettiği-surece-koltugunda-oturabiliyor-makale-1512298>.

⁵⁰ Kemal Kirişçi, Mine Eder, and Mert Arslanalp, “Resistance to Erdoğan’s Encroachment at Turkey’s Top University, One Year On,” Brookings Institute, 21 January 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/01/21/resistance-to-erdogans-encroachment-at-turkeys-top-university-one-year-on> (accessed 24 May 2022).

⁵¹ Selin Bengi Gumrukcu, “The 2023 Turkish Elections: A Roller Coaster Ride between Hope and Despair,” Public Seminar, 14 June 2023, <https://publicseminar.org/essays/the-2023-turkish-elections> (accessed 30 July 2023).

⁵² “Bogazici ogrencileri secim oncesi seslendi: Hesap soracağız,” *Evrensel*, <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/489885/bogazici-universtesi-ogrencileri-secim-oncesinde-seslendi-hesap-soracagiz> (accessed 31 July 2023).

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