

Turkey's academics pay heavy price for resisting Erdoğan's militarised politics

Written by The Conversation USA

While [the EU and the US have turned a blind eye](#) to the Turkish government's brutal clampdown in Kurdish regions, Turkish academics who have spoken out about the regime's increasingly dictatorial policies have faced punishment and even imprisonment.

A [petition published](#) in early January by the Academicians for Peace initiative, criticising the Turkish state's political and military attacks against the Kurdish people, raised a red flag with its signatories stating: "We will not be a party to this crime." They wrote:

The Turkish state has effectively condemned its citizens in Sur, Silvan, Nusaybin, Cizre, Silopi, and many other towns and neighborhoods 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 mobilized 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.

In response, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan immediately [demanded that all institutions in Turkey take action](#)

: "Everyone who benefits from this state but is now an enemy of the state must be punished without further delay."

Academics targeted

Following this, Turkish federal prosecutors have [investigated 1,128 of the signatories](#) with [33 academics from three Turkish universities](#) in Bolu, Kocaeli and Bursa being detained because of their alleged propaganda for a terrorist organisation and insulting the Turkish nation, state, government and institutions.

Turkey's top higher education body, the Higher Education Board (YÖK), [has called for university administrators](#) to impose disciplinary sanctions against the academics. Subsequently, [109 academics from 42 Turkish universities](#) were subjected to dismissal, discharge, suspension, termination and forced resignation.

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A government-backed [counter-petition, Academics Against Terror](#) , has also been organised. The Grey Wolves, also known as Idealist Hearts, a formal youth organisation of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) in the Turkish parliament, has even [marked the office doors of signatories and left written threats](#)

Despite this, immediately after the government's response, the number of academics participating in the campaign [increased from 1,128 to 4,491](#) . There has also been a [public reaction](#) against the government's tactics.

Within just two weeks, [independent petition campaigns](#) organised by a variety of civic and professional organisations have collected more than 60,000 signatories, and supporting statements have been released by 65 organisations that have millions of members across the country.

The original petition has also created much-needed [international solidarity](#) with more than 60 international institutions, organisations, leading academics and politicians issuing messages of support and ten international petition campaigns being organised worldwide.

The recent clampdown on academics characterises the scope of [the new "counterterrorism" strategy](#) of the Turkish state. This "new" doctrine is again promoting a military solution to the Kurdish question by concentrating state violence against the Kurds and supporters of Kurdish rights.

Political plotting

After a [period of fragile negotiations](#) with the hope of ending the decades-long conflict, the new doctrine [has emerged](#) since [the June 2015 Turkish general elections](#) , when Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) [failed to win a majority in parliament for a single-party government](#)

The government introduced the strategy after the June elections in an attempt to win back the votes of Turkish nationalists in the MHP, a long standing ultra-nationalist political party, and the “borrowed votes” of Turkish dissidents who temporarily collaborated with the HDP, a pro-Kurdish and pro-minority political party.

The Turkish state is also using [the Syrian refugee crisis](#) and [military intervention against the so-called Islamic State](#) to [gain international support from the EU and the US](#)

In line with the “new” doctrine, the ongoing ceasefire agreement and peace negotiations between the Turkish state and the PKK (Kurdistan Worker’s Party) were officially suspended in July, with a [state of emergency and curfew declared in Kurdish territories](#) by the AKP government.

According to [a report in Turkish by the Human Rights Association in Turkey](#) , between June and November, 602 people (including 41 children) were killed, 1,300 people were injured, 1,004 people were jailed and 5,713 people were taken into custody during the military operations in Kurdish towns. There were also 134 people killed and 564 injured in two suicide bombings in Suruç and Ankara.

This campaign seemed to pay off for the AKP, with a significant increase in support within the six-month period. The AKP won 49.50% [in a second parliamentary election called on November 1 2015](#) , returning their single party majority.

Entrenching positions

It seems that Turkey’s “new” anti-Kurdish doctrine is a strategic, precautionary manoeuvre to maintain the popularity of Erdoğan’s regime. The government is aiming to avoid potential resistance, such as that experienced in the Gezi Park uprising in 2013, which unified [a wide range of dissidents](#) including leftists, Turkish nationalists, capitalists from the upper classes and religious groups.

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Through its anti-Kurd strategy, the government is simultaneously deepening localised political and social tensions in Kurdish regions and reunifying right-wing nationalist civil society and political organisations under the flag of Turkish chauvinism.

In this light, the petition by Academicians for Peace is not only a revolt against the government's Kurdish policy, but also a very effective swipe at the crucial point of the "new" strategy. It draws academics, students, intellectuals and other urban professionals together throughout the country, [sending a wake-up call to the international public](#) that Erdoğan's new political and military strategy cannot be tolerated.

Steffen Böhm has received funding from: British Academy, East of England Co-operative Society, Green Light Trust, Swedish Energy Agency and the ESRC, though he writes in a personal capacity.

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