



**Middle
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H.E. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan
President of the Republic of Turkey
T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Genel Sekreterliği
06689 Çankaya, Ankara
Turkey

Dear President Erdoğan:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) of North America and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our deep concern with your government's continued campaign against academics whose expertise is in public health, subjecting them to judicial harassment and disciplinary investigations for making public their research findings. The latest case in this disturbing trend is the targeting of Professor Kayihan Pala, who faces a disciplinary investigation for sharing his expert views on the numbers of reported Covid-19 cases in Bursa. The investigation of Professor Pala sends a chilling message that your government seeks to suppress information related to Covid-19 infection rates at the expense of the lives and rights of Turkish citizens. Furthermore, it adds to your government's alarming pattern of undermining public health and academic freedom.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 2500 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

[Kayihan Pala](#), a professor in the Department of Public Health at the School of Medicine in Uludağ University, is also [an active member](#) of the [Turkish Medical Association](#) (Türk Tabipleri Birliği, TTB) and a member of the Association's Covid-19 Monitoring Group. The Turkish Medical Association has long been [a target](#) for adhering to the ethics and principles of the medical profession rather than prioritizing your government's political and economic interests. As part of this monitoring group, [Professor Pala is responsible for preparing regular medical reports on the pandemic](#). On 20 April 2020, he gave an [interview](#) on [enBursa.com](#), where he shared his research findings on the pandemic and his conclusion that the city of Bursa was suppressing data on Covid-19 cases and related fatalities. The Provincial Administration Board in the Office of the Governor of Bursa, composed of bureaucrats appointed by your government, has [filed a criminal complaint with the Bursa Public Prosecutor's Office](#) on the grounds that Professor Pala "misinformed the public" and allegedly "incited public panic." According to media reports, the Prosecutor's Office decided it did not have jurisdiction over the case. When it thus became clear that Professor Pala would not face prosecution, his university launched a disciplinary investigation against him for publicizing his academic findings on Covid-19.

The case of Professor Pala is consistent with your government's pattern of persecuting academics perceived to be critics of your public health policies. (See our letters dated [12 December 2012](#), [30 October 2015](#), and [20 July 2020](#)). For example, former Chair of the Department of Public Health at Kocaeli University, Professor Onur Hamzaoğlu, was similarly targeted by your party's officials for revealing results of his research documenting [carcinogenic industrial pollution in the Dilovası region](#). At the time, the AKP mayors of Kocaeli and Dilovası filed a lawsuit against Professor Hamzaoğlu on grounds of alleged "[academic misconduct](#)" for publishing his research findings and thereby purportedly inciting public panic. Our earlier letters also document the case of Professor Beyza Üstün, targeted for disciplinary investigation because she published her research on the public health impact of hydroelectric power plants (see our letter dated [30 October 2015](#)). Likewise, food safety and environment specialist Professor Bülent Şık received a prison sentence for publicizing his research findings on the carcinogenic impact of industrial pollution (see our letter dated [20 July 2020](#)). While these scholars have been penalized for their work on the adverse health impacts of your government's environmental and industrial policies, academics supportive of such policies, like the Rector of Ankara University, Erkan İbiş, are celebrated for promoting dubious research on the safety of nuclear energy (see our letters dated [12 December 2012](#), [12 January 2017](#) and [16 February 2017](#)). In the midst of a pandemic when government obligations to protect public health have become clearer than ever, your government's targeting of professionals who disclose public health risks reflects a deeply disturbing disregard for the health and safety of your citizens. In addition, your government's record is inimical to academic freedom in the field of public health.

As a member state of the Council of Europe and a signatory of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Turkey is required to protect academic freedom, which is grounded in the freedom of thought, expression and assembly. Turkey is also a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), all of which protect the rights to freedom of expression and association, which are at the heart of academic freedom. Additionally, these rights are enshrined in articles 25-27 of the Turkish Constitution. Lastly, Turkey is a signatory of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which includes obligations both to protect Turkish citizens' rights to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health and to "respect the freedom indispensable for scientific research." (Article 15(3)).

Once again, we respectfully urge your government to desist from repressing academic freedom and freedom of expression for scholars and researchers. In particular, we call on your government to halt the targeting of scholars whose research discloses the adverse effects of your policies on public health and the environment. We also demand that all disciplinary investigations against Professor Pala be dropped and that your government

desist from harassing medical researchers and practitioners, as well as their academic and professional associations. Guaranteeing the freedom to conduct research necessary to identifying risks, mitigating harm and offering protections for public health is an essential element of your government's capacity to meet its most basic obligations, especially during a pandemic. The changes we respectfully request would send the message to your citizens and the Turkish scientific community that you prioritize the protection of both public health and academic freedom over partisan political or economic gains.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to your positive response.

Sincerely,



Dina Rizk Khoury
MESA President
Professor, George Washington University



Laurie Brand
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom
Professor, University of Southern California

cc:

Ibrahim Kalın, Chief Advisor to the President and Presidential Spokesman
Mustafa Şentop, Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Başkanı (President of the
Turkish National Assembly)
Abdülhamit Gül, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Adalet Bakanı (Justice Minister of the
Republic of Turkey)
Yekta Saraç, Türkiye Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu (YÖK) Başkanı (President of
the Turkish Higher Education Council)
Ziya Selçuk, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Milli Eğitim Bakanı (Minister of Education
of the Republic of Turkey)
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Affairs of the Republic of Turkey)
Maria Arena, Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human
Rights
Viktor Almqvist, Press Officer for the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the
European Parliament
Josep Borrell Fontelles, High Representative of the European Union for
Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
Fiona Knab-Lunny, Member of Cabinet of Josep Borrell, High Representative
of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
Hannah Neumann, Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on
Human Rights

Raphael Glucksmann, Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights

Christian Danielsson, Director-General for Enlargement at the European Commission

Dunja Mijatović, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Kati Piri, Member, Committee on Foreign Affairs, European Parliament

Nacho Sanchez Amor, Member of European Parliament and European Parliament Standing Turkey Rapporteur

Verónica Michelle Bachelet Jeria, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

David Kaye, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression

Koumbou Boly Barry, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to education

World Medical Association

Turkish Medical Association

Physicians for Human Rights

Ahmet Saim Kilavuz, Uludağ University Rector