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20 January 2021

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 concerns related to the ongoing curtailment of the autonomy of higher education in Turkey, which is having a deeply felt impact on academic freedom in the country, particularly at public universities. The erosion of the autonomy of Turkey's higher education institutions began following the 1980 military coup, continued under different governments, and has now greatly accelerated under your presidency.

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 2800 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.

The autonomy of the Turkish higher education sector was dealt a devastating blow by the military coup of 1980 and the subsequent creation of the Council of Higher Education (*Yükseköğretim Kurulu*, or YÖK), which brought the era of elected university presidents (also known as rectors, in Turkey) to an end in 1981. YÖK, a Council that included military officers in its membership, adopted the practice of selecting university presidents by forwarding four candidates to the head of the military junta, Kenan Evren, for him to make the ultimate selection. In 1992, elections were partially reintroduced with universities being given a partial role in the selection process. Universities were permitted to forward the names of six candidates who ran in university elections to YÖK for the latter to create a short list of three professors that would be submitted to the President of the Republic for the final selection. This practice was far from ideal, leaving ample room for YÖK and the President to disregard the ordered results of university elections. Ultimately, the system of semi-autonomous selection contributed to a gradual politicization of the office of university presidents, some of whom actively entered politics after their terms as rectors.

While your civilian government rhetorically distances itself from the military coups that marked Turkey for decades, you and your government have in fact made ample use of the authoritarian tools and institutions established by the military to crack down on the autonomy of Turkey's universities and to stifle academic freedom: among them, YÖK, rule by emergency decree, restrictive Higher Education regulations, and mass purges of dissident academics. Representation of the [military on YÖK](#)

continued until recently, but its removal has not resulted in a Council that is more respectful of university autonomy or academic freedom. To the contrary, your civilian government has used the tools and institutions first designed under military rule to launch an assault on Turkish academia on a scale that exceeds the damage inflicted by the military.

In 2016, while you were President of the Republic, members of parliament from the Justice and Development Party (AKP) proposed to abolish the semi-autonomous selection process in favor of a system that would empower YÖK to submit a short list of three professors, thereby removing university elections from the process. Facing widespread parliamentary opposition, the AKP withdrew this proposal in August of that year. As we noted in our letter of [7 November 2016](#), your former Prime Minister, Binali Yıldırım, nonetheless imposed this system on Turkey by emergency decree (Kanun Hükmünde Kararname, KHK, 676) in October 2016. The elimination of university rector elections trampled on norms of democratic university governance and opened the door to a selection process in which you have repeatedly privileged partisanship over academic qualifications. Your record demonstrates that you prioritize ideological loyalty in higher education above academic freedom, scholarly achievement, research productivity and meritocratic selection criteria. In this regard, you not only follow in the footsteps of prior military governments, but appear to have overtaken them in the scale of your ambition to subordinate higher education to direct government control.

In the four years since university elections were suspended and you seized direct appointment authority, you have reportedly appointed twenty former members of parliament, mayoral candidates, MP candidates, and siblings or spouses of MPs—all from your party—as university presidents. According to a recent [study](#) on Turkish university presidents that analyzed their social media usage (between January and May 2019), 78% of the rectors you have appointed wrote Twitter posts that touted their loyalty to your government and detailed “their visits, hospitality services to government members and others, and activities with associations close to the government.” Not surprisingly, the same study found a negative correlation between the number of social media posts of the rectors and their academic qualifications, as well as a positive correlation between these academically unqualified university presidents and the poor academic rankings of the universities they lead.

In addition to the straightforward politicization of the office of university rector, your appointments favor candidates whose educational background is in theology. [A 2014 study](#) found that less than two percent of university presidents had any prior training in theology, while [a more recent study](#) from 2019 found that 8.6% of Turkish university presidents had been members of faculties of theology before their appointments and that “one in 37 theology professors is a rector.” This percentage rises to 12.6% among public university presidents. As a point of comparison, of the more than 10,000 professors of medicine and 5,000 professors of engineering,

however, only 43 and 37 are represented among university presidents, respectively. The overrepresentation of professors of theology among public university presidents is of even greater concern due to the increased emphasis on “public morality and decency” that was introduced by your government in university disciplinary regulations last year. As we noted in our letter of [8 June 2020](#), such vague phrases not only enable the arbitrary targeting of faculty for expressing dissent, but also risk subjecting scholars perceived as not conforming to certain theological views—including, but not limited to those identified with or working on non-normative gender or sexual identities, orientations, or expressions—to forms of discipline.

Beyond the political and disciplinary biases reflected in your appointments of university presidents, your efforts to transform Turkish universities into ideological party strongholds are also reflected in the increasing number of dismissals without cause of academics who oppose your government’s policies, as documented in our letters concerning the hundreds of Peace Petition signatories who have been dismissed since 2016 (see our letters dated [14 January 2016](#), [8 February 2016](#), [22 February 2016](#), [17 March 2016](#), [6 September 2016](#), [12 January 2017](#), [8 February 2017](#), [4 April 2017](#), [5 May 2017](#), [31 July 2017](#), [13 September 2017](#), [17 October 2017](#), [16 February 2018](#), [17 July 2018](#), [21 March 2019](#) and [11 June 2019](#)). But these dismissals are only the tip of the iceberg. According to [a report published by YÖK](#), 10,202 disciplinary investigations were launched in 141 universities in 2018, ostensibly “in order to increase peace and security (*huzur ve güvenin artırılması amacıyla*).” As we pointed out in our letter dated [8 June 2020](#), amendments to the Turkish Higher Education Law enacted by your government on 17 April 2020 now subject Turkish academics to rules that violate academic freedom even more so than those that facilitated over 10,000 investigations in 2018. Academics may now be disciplined by YÖK for such things as “being verbally disrespectful toward superiors.” Rather than supporting academic freedom and encouraging faculty to pursue scholarly inquiry, Turkish university administrators are clearly being encouraged by your government to investigate and discipline faculty members who do not adhere to your party line or who are inadequately deferential to the political appointees running their universities.

Many of the trends we describe in this letter are specific to public universities, though your government has also targeted private universities in other respects, by shuttering many universities based on the identity of founding donors (as detailed in our letter of [14 December 2016](#)) or by targeting specific private universities identified with individuals with whom you have a personal, ongoing political dispute (such as the case of Şehir University, which we addressed in our letter of [20 May 2020](#)). Still, with respect to university governance, Turkish private universities have been shielded to some extent from the encroachments on academic freedom and university autonomy experienced by public universities. KHK 676 in October 2016 allowed private universities’ trustees to submit their own choice of president to YÖK, to then be forwarded on to you for your approval. In 2018, KHK 703/135 abolished the role of YÖK in creating short lists of rector

candidates for public universities—leaving the President with sole discretion in making those appointments—but still allowed the trustees of private universities to submit their own choices to your office. In short, the law as it stands privileges private universities by granting their trustees influence over the selection of university presidents for their institutions. It is not surprising, therefore, that some private universities have much more accomplished presidents than public universities. (According to a recent [study](#), a certain private university president has more articles listed in an international scholarly index of citations than the articles of 137 other rectors combined.) In short, Turkish higher education law discriminates against public universities by denying them any institutional representation in your selection of candidates to serve as their rectors. By contrast, the autonomy of private universities depends on the practices adopted by their trustees, who may (or may not) decide to adopt inclusive and transparent processes that include academic faculty members of their university in the choice of rector.

It is this lack of representation that drew so many faculty members and students of Boğaziçi University—still the most academically productive public university in Turkey, according to a [study](#) published by the Turkish Academy of Sciences—to protest your appointment of the former AKP politician, Melih Bulu, as their university’s president (something we addressed in our letter of [7 January 2021](#)). The process for his selection involved neither input nor oversight from any representatives of Boğaziçi University. YÖK [announced](#) a search for the presidency of Boğaziçi University on 9 October 2020, with a deadline for applications of 23 October 2020. You appointed Bulu on 1 January 2021.

Even the standards applied by YÖK in 1981, while Turkey was ruled by a military junta, allowed for a greater degree of public oversight over such appointments. For one thing, some of the YÖK officials involved in creating short lists of candidates had previously served as university administrators themselves. Moreover, the criteria for being considered for such an appointment included fifteen years of service. By contrast, the criteria established by the [Presidential Decrees of 2018](#) for candidacy as a university president lower this requirement to five years, and the ultimate selection depends exclusively on your discretion. These distinctions help explain the difference between the only other instance in which an outside candidate was imposed as president of Boğaziçi University—the appointment of the well-regarded academic, Ergün Toğrol, by the military junta in 1982—and the current controversy. Bulu is not only an outsider, but his qualifications stand in stark contrast to those of Toğrol. Far from being well-regarded, Bulu’s academic credentials have been widely questioned, with persistent [accusations of plagiarism](#), among other things. A selection process that involves no academics and takes no academic criteria into account in selecting the president of the country’s top public university can only serve to further undermine higher education in Turkey, which, unsurprisingly, has resulted in protests well beyond the confines of Boğaziçi.



We have written to you many times to request the reversal of particular policies that are in violation of academic freedom or that target individual academics or specific universities. We write now to decry the overall pattern of reduced autonomy for public universities in Turkey, the distinction between public and private universities in the selection of university presidents, the national trend of disproportionate representation of theologians among rectors, and the overall pattern of appointing political figures or those with ties to your party as university presidents. We demand that you rescind the KHKs and Presidential Decrees that today govern the appointment of university presidents in Turkey, giving you sole authority over such appointments in the case of public universities. We request that your government restore the autonomy of the higher education sector in Turkey by returning to universities—both private and public—the authority to select their own presidents through an inclusive and transparent election process. Such reforms would bring your government into closer compliance with Turkey’s obligations as a member of the Council of Europe as well as Turkish constitutional protections of the freedoms of speech, thought, expression and assembly that are intimately related to the right to academic freedom. The autonomy of the Turkish higher education sector is directly related to the quality of education and training that Turkish universities provide and the reputation they enjoy internationally, all of which have significantly deteriorated under your government. We urge you to take the steps we have outlined to restore academic freedom and the status of Turkish universities as internationally reputed institutions of higher learning.

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)

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

Irene Khan, 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

Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Rektörlüğü (Office of the Rector of Bogazici University)

Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Mezunlar Derneği (Bogazici University Alumni Association)