

A Report on Academic Freedoms in Turkey in the Period of the State of Emergency / İnan Özdemir Taştan & Aydın Ördek

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The report has been written to outline the findings of the fieldwork launched within the framework of the project Bringing Human Rights Academy to Society funded by European Instrument for Democracy & Human Rights (EIDHR) and conducted by the Capacity Development Association in order to reveal the effects of State of Emergency in Turkey on academic freedoms.
- The main aim of the research is to determine the extent to which academic freedoms and autonomy has been violated during the SoE period, declared following the July 15 military coup attempt.
- The research was carried out in the second half of 2018.
- Within the scope of the research, 422 face-to-face surveys and 30 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with 331 academics and 90 graduate students studying in the fields of social sciences, humanities and educational sciences in 54 State and Foundation Universities located in 13 different provinces and seven different regions of Turkey.
- The primary findings of the research can be listed as follows:
 - One of the main findings of the survey is that higher education institutions in Turkey do not have institutional mechanisms or units geared for academic freedom and autonomy. **Universities do not care about academic freedoms and do not endeavor to inform their staff on this issue.** Therefore, a significant number of academics have limited knowledge about academic freedoms and have not been trained or informed about academic autonomy and freedom during their education or employment. This institutional and informational shortcoming creates lack of information among academics as to what to do and what sort of action to take when they encounter a violation of rights.
 - According to the research findings, the most obvious effect of SoE on academic freedoms is that it has increased **self-censorship**. Self-censorship is spread

across all domains of the academic field (lectures, research, publications, and academic events such as conferences). Academics are forced to practice self-censorship in all kinds of academic activities; therefore, academia is not free in this sense.

- During the SoE, the study of **subjects contrary to the mainstream political and ideological sensitivities in Turkey could only be carried out with reservations and encountered various pressures**. It has been determined that these studies faced censorship at various levels or that publication of these subjects has been difficult. One of the results of this is the narrowing of academic fields of study and the increase of publications that deal with "insignificant" or "technical" issues in the field of social sciences.

- **It has been established that academics' research activities and projects are blocked by the administrators for political and ideological reasons, as well as the self-censorship academics themselves practice**. The academics stated that they could not conduct research on the subjects they wanted in the SoE, they practices self-censorship while supervising thesis dissertation, and changed their study subjects due to the pressure they felt.

- **During the SoE, some academic activities were restricted or cancelled altogether, especially those "assumedly dealing with sensitive or objectionable" issues**. One of the most striking examples of this is the prevention of activities aimed at discussing SoE in universities.

- The increasingly harsh political climate, including the pre-SoE, restricted freedom of the lectern, that is academics' freedom of in the classroom. **Student denunciations, which became widespread before and after the SoE, proved to be one of the primary obstacles to the freedom of the lectern**. The denunciations reached such a point that the academics were held responsible also for the statements of other students in the classes.

- Another important finding of the research is the insecure environment and isolation created by widespread practice of denunciation, investigations filed by administrators, and dismissals of academics from the public service with decrees. **Academics stated that they could not trust their colleagues**.

- **The Armenian Question, the Kurdish Question, ethnic identities, sexual identities, religion, criticism of the government, or the SoE itself are the taboo topics in the academia**. It has been found that academics who do not study these issues in line with the official ideology have concerns that they will be subjected to administrative and judicial investigations, social, local and political pressure, be reported by their students, and their academic promotion will be prevented.

- **It has been seen that the pro-government monopolization of media that took place in the Turkish media before and after the SoE turned the social media into an alternative medium**. Nevertheless, it has been observed that academics felt uneasy and under pressure to share posts on the social media. A considerable

number of academics stated that they reduced their social media sharing or stopped using social media during the SoE period.

- **With the SoE, the most extensive academic purge experienced in Turkey's university history has completely eliminated academics' job security with dismissals and security investigations that every academic is subjected to.** According to the findings of the research, academics' problems and concerns over job security gradually increased during the SoE. This problem is more severe in public universities. For the academics who live under the pressure of losing their job security, the production of knowledge, research and teaching activities have fallen behind their efforts to maintain their present position. In this framework, academics stated that they lost faith in their professions. According to academics, the biggest threat posed by the SoE towards academic freedoms is the destruction of job security. So much so that, according to academics, the most adverse effect of universities in the SoE was the dismissal of academics from public office with the decree laws.

- The repressive practices of administrators who are equipped with extraordinary powers in the SoE to erode academic freedoms are exempt from legal control. According to the findings of the research, **intense pressure of investigation on academics consolidated the culture of submissiveness.**

- **Mobbing originating from administrators** at all levels and interest groups at universities is a treatment that academics often face both before and during the SoE.

- **Criteria of appointment-promotion and performance pose a serious threat to job security** and academic freedom due to workload especially at the foundation universities.

- **It has been observed with the research that academics feel threatened because of their political ideas and academic studies.** In this context, investigations, threats and dismissals faced by academics who signed the Peace Declaration before and after the SoE have been a source of fear and pressure for the academy.

- **The SoE has damaged the unionization of academics** and education workers in general. Unions that are anti-government have lost a significant number of their members. According to the findings of the research, academics who were members of anti-government unions during the SoE were encouraged to leave their unions, and they have been subjected to various violations of rights, such as withholding their staff, not allowing them have their appointments and promotions, not providing them with projects, or stopping them from attending events abroad.

- **Academics were less involved in decision-making processes in universities, faculties and departments during the SoE period.** Academics stated that the most important violation of autonomy is the **abolition of the rector elections.**

- According to the findings of the research, **academics are exposed to rights violations due to their political views, sexual, ethnic and religious identities.**

- Academics defined their situation as **“culture of fear”, “climate of fear”, “fear regime”, “atmosphere of fear”, “empire of fear”, “wave of fear”** during the SoE.
 - The research also established that with the SoE, **the academy became silent**, unresponsive to the problems of the country and the world.
 - The participants were observed to agree on the fact that the damage caused by SoE could not be compensated for many years and **they were pessimistic about the future of the university.**
 - According to the findings of the research, **graduate students think that political, religious views and beliefs, sexual orientation are important in admission to graduate programs and favoritism is at a high level.**
 - With the SoE, it was found that **the desire of graduate students to become academics decreased significantly.**
 - **Graduate students cannot express their thoughts freely in their program.** One of the most important effects of the SoE on graduate students is that they had to practice self-censorship in their assignments and thesis dissertations. Three-quarters of the students stated that they could not write a thesis dissertation on the subject they wanted.
 - Finally, it was established that that **some of the graduate students thought their academic freedom was violated due to their ethnic, religious and sexual orientation and they felt threatened because of their academic activities.**
- In summary, the SoE, declared after July 15, 2016 military coup attempt, has transformed the Turkish higher education system which already suffered from structural problems in terms of academic autonomy and freedom and carried it to a certain point where it had been.