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# THE COSTS OF A PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM: THE IMPACT OF HYPER-CENTRALIZATION ON TURKEY’S EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS

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## Introduction

Since 2016, thousands of purged Turkish academics have lost not only their university positions, but also their benefits, pensions, and passports. Since 2017, Osman Kavala, one of Turkey’s leading philanthropists and human rights advocates, has been held in solitary confinement at a maximum-security prison following his arrest on trumped-up charges. Since 2021, hundreds of academics at Istanbul’s Boğaziçi University, one of the country’s top public universities, have been standing in the main quad every day to protest the loss of academic freedoms brought about by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s unilateral imposition of new university leadership. These alarming developments epitomize the devastating impact that a hyper-centralized presidential system has had on Turkey’s educational and cultural affairs.

The growing malaise in Turkey’s educational and cultural fields stems from two critical shortcomings resulting from hyper-centralization: the erosion of the rule of law and due process and the ensuing arbitrary rule by an all-powerful president. The fragility of academic and media freedoms in the country and the lack of legal and cultural norms

guaranteeing freedom of speech compound the problem. The complicity of many academics in these purges — and the cowed silence of others — has had a chilling effect on Turkey’s academic and cultural life, exemplified by the ongoing exodus of dissident academics and intellectuals, who have increasingly sought refuge in the West to continue their critical work and advocacy without fear of persecution.

The presidential system’s devastation of the educational and cultural fields has also spilled over into the economic domain, as Turkey continues to miss its narrow demographic window of opportunity to transition from a low value-added economy into a knowledge economy well-positioned in global supply chains. Among the OECD countries, Turkey has the highest ratio of youth not in employment, education, or training (NEET).<sup>1,2</sup> The academic and cultural impoverishment of the country not only pushes youth outside lifelong learning opportunities but also fails to equip those enrolled in secondary and tertiary educational institutions with the skills

1. “Turkey has the highest NEET rate among OECD countries,” May 20, 2021, BIA News, <https://bianet.org/english/labor/244360-turkey-has-the-highest-neet-rate-among-oecd-countries>.

2. “Youth not in unemployment, education or training (NEET) (indicator),” 2022, OECD, <https://data.oecd.org/youthinac/youth-not-in-employment-education-or-training-neet.htm>, Accessed on July 22, 2022.

required to succeed in today's global economy. In Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests, Turkish students remain below the OECD average in all three tested areas, namely, mathematics, reading skills, and science.<sup>3</sup> The steady decline of Turkish institutions in world university rankings is yet another indicator of the significant headwinds Turkey will face when competing against other countries that cherish fundamental rights and freedoms, nurture academic and cultural creativity, and are thus able to take advantage of the ongoing digital, technological, and AI revolutions.<sup>4</sup>

Exacerbating all these problems is the refusal within Turkey's ruling Islamist-ultranationalist coalition to recognize the country's troubling trajectory, despite the tell-tale signs of brain drain, capital exodus, devaluation, and hyperinflation. What domestic and foreign investors see as Turkey's key shortcomings as an investment destination, Erdoğan's inner circle of loyalists view as a successful consolidation of power and eradication of dissent. As the ruling elite continues to demonize the scholarly achievements and cultural capital associated with academic and cultural fields as a technocratic threat to their majoritarian rule, they also cherish the impoverishment of the intellectual climate as the culmination of their long sought-after cultural hegemony. For the Islamist-ultranationalist coalition, the ascendancy of a religio-nationalist discourse and supremacist values over a cosmopolitan ethos associated with the West is an important win for its nativist socio-cultural engineering project.

## Manifestations of Hyper-Centralization

### Purging Turkey's Academia

In January 2016, more than a thousand academics from over 80 universities, collectively named the Academics for Peace, signed a petition protesting human rights abuses against the Kurds in southeastern Turkey.<sup>5</sup> The petition condemned the Turkish government's heavy-handed military operations against the militants of the Kurdistan Workers'

3. Esra Ülkar, "Significant improvement in all education fields, but Turkey still below OECD average, PISA results show," December 4, 2019, *Hurriyet Daily News*, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/students-improve-scores-in-global-academic-test-in-turkey-149426>.

4. Lale Akarun, "Why do Turkish Universities fall in International Rankings?" December 29, 2021, *Yetkin Report*, <https://yetkinreport.com/en/2021/12/29/why-turkish-universities-fell-in-rankings/>.

5. Academics for Peace, "We will not be a party to this crime! (In English, French, German, Spanish, Arabic, Russian, Greek)," January 10, 2016, *Barış İçin Akademisyenler*, <https://barisicinakademisyenler.net/node/63>.

Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK), which the Turkish government, the U.S., and the EU have designated as a terrorist group. The operations condemned in the petition resulted in heavy civilian casualties and the destruction of entire neighborhoods. The signatories also demanded an end to human rights violations in southeastern Turkey and called for resuming peace talks with the PKK.

The petition incurred Erdoğan's wrath, who slammed its signatories as traitors.<sup>6</sup> The Turkish president also demanded that universities open disciplinary investigations against these academics. Within a week, the Turkish police detained 27 signatories, charging them with engaging in terrorist propaganda.<sup>7</sup> Following Erdoğan's call, a brutal crackdown ensued. Thirty-nine universities denounced the petition and launched disciplinary investigations, suspending or dismissing hundreds of academics. Prosecutors across Turkey launched criminal investigations, detaining hundreds of academics and arresting three.<sup>8 9</sup> Over 800 signatories faced trial, 100 of whom received prison sentences ranging from 15 to 36 months. Ultimately, all but 12 sentences were deferred and many petitioners were acquitted.<sup>10</sup> As of April 2022, 90 trials were still ongoing.<sup>11</sup>

The second big wave of academic purges came following the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016. In the immediate aftermath, the government declared a state of emergency, suspending the rule of law and due process, and ruling by emergency decree. A massive crackdown on a wide spectrum of dissidents ensued, the speed and scale of which were unprecedented. Ultimately, some 150,000 civil servants, including academics, were purged.

The failed coup attempt provided a pretext to suppress universities and academics allegedly linked to the secretive

6. "Erdoğan: Sözde akademisyenlerin haddini bilmesi lazım," January 12, 2016, *BBC Türkçe*, [https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2016/01/160111\\_Erdoğan\\_akademisyen\\_aciklama](https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2016/01/160111_Erdoğan_akademisyen_aciklama).

7. Matthew Weaver, "Turkey rounds up academics who signed petition denouncing attacks on Kurds," January 15, 2016, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/15/turkey-rounds-up-academics-who-signed-petition-denouncing-attacks-on-kurds>.

8. Academics for Peace, "Davalar/Lawsuits," *Barış İçin Akademisyenler*, <https://barisicinakademisyenler.net/node/431>, Accessed on July 25, 2022.

9. Zülal Koçer and Eylem Nazlier, "Erdoğan işareti verdi, barış isteyen akademisyenler tutuklandı," March 15, 2016, *Evrensel*, <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/274971/Erdoğan-ışareti-verdi-baris-isteyen-akademisyenler-tutuklandi>.

10. Tansu Pişkin, "First Verdict of Acquittal in Trial of Academics for Peace After Constitutional Court Ruling," September 6, 2019, *BIA News*, <https://bianet.org/english/freedom-of-expression/212708-first-verdict-of-acquittal-in-trial-of-academics-for-peace-after-constitutional-court-ruling>.

11. Academics for Peace, "Davalar/Lawsuits," *Barış İçin Akademisyenler*, <https://barisicinakademisyenler.net/node/431>, Accessed on July 25, 2022.



Photo above: Turkish riot police detain protesters on September 14, 2017 outside Ankara's Courthouse during the trial of two Turkish teachers who went on a hunger strike over their dismissal under a government decree following last year's failed coup. Photo by STR/AFP via Getty Images.

religious network of Fethullah Gülen, an Erdoğan ally-turned-archnemesis living in self-imposed exile in the United States.<sup>12</sup> In the two weeks following the coup, Turkish authorities not only suspended or fired some 9,000 police officers and 3,000 members of the judiciary, but also targeted schools and universities. Some 21,000 private school teachers and 21,000 Ministry of Education officials were suspended or fired alongside more than 15,000 education staff members.<sup>13</sup> The European University Foundation (EUF) and the European University Association (EUA) issued a statement condemning the forced resignation of over 1,500 university deans in Turkey.<sup>14</sup> <sup>15</sup> By the end of July, the Turkish

government canceled 50,000 passports belonging to civil servants, including those of academics.<sup>16</sup>

Making use of the state of emergency provisions, the Erdoğan government issued executive orders to fire university staff. Waves of purges continued, and by October 2016, over 100,000 people were sacked or suspended, including thousands of academics.<sup>17</sup> The precarious employment situation for state employees continued even after the state of emergency was lifted.<sup>18</sup> <sup>19</sup> As of April 2022, some 6,000 academics lost their positions, retirement and

12. Ben Hubbard, Tim Arango, and Ceylan Yeginsu, "Failed Turkish coup accelerated a purge years in the making," July 22, 2016, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/23/world/middleeast/failed-turkish-coup-accelerated-a-purge-years-in-the-making.html>.

13. "Turkey coup: Purge widens to education sector," July 19, 2016, *BBC*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36838347>.

14. "Statement condemning the forced resignation of university deans in Turkey," July 20, 2016, *European University Foundation*, <https://uni-foundation.eu/statement-condemning-the-forced-resignation-of-university-deans-in-turkey/>.

15. Ben Hubbard, Tim Arango, and Ceylan Yeginsu, "Failed Turkish coup accelerated a purge years in the making," July 22, 2016, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/23/world/middleeast/failed-turkish-coup-accelerated-a-purge-years-in-the-making.html>.

16. Lizzie Dearden, "Turkey coup attempt: Government cancels 50,000 passports as global concern grows over crackdown," July 30, 2016, *The Independent*, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/turkey-coup-attempt-Erdogan-news-latest-government-cancels-50-000-passports-amid-international-concern-over-crackdown-a7163961.html>.

17. Humeyra Pamuk, "Turkey sacks 10,000 more civil servants, shuts media in latest crackdown," October 30, 2016, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-dismissals-idUSKBN12U04L>.

18. Kareem Shaheen, "Turkey dismisses 4,400 public servants in latest post-coup attempt purge," February 8, 2017, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/08/turkey-dismisses-4400-public-servants-Erdogan-trump-phone-call>.

19. Associated Press, "Turkey fires thousands of state employees in anti-terrorism purge," July 8, 2018, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/08/turkey-fires-thousands-of-public-servants-in-anti-terror-purge>.



health benefits, passports, and any prospect of finding employment in Turkish universities, public or private.<sup>20</sup> These purged academics were not only placed on blacklists, preventing their gainful employment by other institutions, but were also ostracized by their peers.

The dismissal and prosecution of academics based on unfounded allegations or conducted without due process have created a climate of fear, significantly limited academic freedoms, and curbed the scholarly community's ability to teach and express and publish criticism.<sup>21</sup> This climate has led not only to self-censorship but also an exodus from Turkey. The purges of academics, first with the Academics for Peace trials and then the post-abortive coup dismissals, contributed significantly to Turkey's brain drain, leaving the future of the country's higher education system in doubt.<sup>22 23</sup>

## The Witch Hunt Continues: The Saga of Osman Kavala

Erdoğan's relentless crackdown following the failed coup attempt extended to settling scores beyond the public sector and universities. The Turkish president also used this opportunity to crack down on the philanthropic field, going after leading public figures active in education, arts, and culture. The highest-profile victim of this campaign was Osman Kavala, who has been held in solitary confinement at a maximum-security prison on the outskirts of Istanbul for the past five years. He was arrested on fabricated charges in late 2017, including financially supporting the 2013 Gezi Protests, masterminding the 2016 failed coup, attempting to overthrow the government, and espionage.

Kavala is one of Turkey's leading philanthropists, known for his generous support for cultural and educational projects promoting democracy, pluralism, gender equality, and ethnic, religious, and sexual minority rights. He is the founder and

20. "Turkey's post-coup crackdown," *Turkey Purge*, updated January 26, 2022, <https://turkeypurge.com/>, Accessed on July 22, 2022.

21. "Turkey: Government Targeting Academics," May 14, 2018, *Human Rights Watch*, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/14/turkey-government-targeting-academics>.

22. Suzy Hansen, "'The Era of People Like You Is Over': How Turkey Purged Its Intellectuals," July 24, 2019, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/24/magazine/the-era-of-people-like-you-is-over-how-turkey-purged-its-intellectuals.html>.

23. Humeyra Pamuk and Ece Toksabay, "Purge of academics leaves future of Turkish universities in doubt," March 1, 2017, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-academics/purge-of-academics-leaves-future-of-turkish-universities-in-doubt-idUSKBN1684DE>.

board chair of the Istanbul-based nonprofit organization Anadolu Kültür, which is a major promoter of arts and culture in Turkey and abroad.<sup>24</sup> Kavala contributed to the establishment of numerous progressive NGOs and served on the boards of directors of the Turkish Foundation of Cinema and Audio-visual Culture (*Türkiye Sinema ve Audiovisual Kültür Vakfı*, TÜRSAK), the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (*Türkiye Ekonomik ve Sosyal Etüdler Vakfı*, TESEV), the History Foundation, the Truth Justice Memory Center, and the Association for the Protection of Cultural Heritage (*Kültürel Mirası Koruma Derneği*, KMKD).<sup>25 26 27 28 29</sup> Kavala received the European Archaeological Heritage Prize in 2019 for efforts to preserve the heritage of Turkey's religious minorities and promote peace and inclusion.<sup>30</sup> He has also been a pioneer in peacebuilding and reconciliation projects, including on Turkish-Kurdish and Turkish-Armenian relations. There is no doubt that Kavala's lifelong commitment to progressive causes motivated his arrest. For Erdoğan and his allies, Kavala is the embodiment par excellence of a pro-Western, secular, and liberal cosmopolitanism whose promotion of pluralism and social inclusion negates the nativist and supremacist tenets of Turkey's Islamist-ultranationalist ruling bloc.

In February 2019, after a 16-month pretrial detention, the prosecutor issued Kavala's indictment. Until then, Kavala and his lawyers had been denied access to his file and had no information about the charges that led to his arrest. Alongside 15 other defendants, prosecutors accused Kavala of organizing and financing the 2013 Gezi protests with the intent to overthrow the government.<sup>31</sup> The indictment, full of conspiracy theories, failed to provide any credible evidence.<sup>32</sup>

24. Anadolu Kültür, <https://www.anadolukultur.org/EN/>, Accessed on July 25, 2022.

25. Türsak [Turkish Foundation of Cinema and Audio-Visual Culture], <https://www.tursak.org.tr/>, Accessed on July 25, 2022.

26. TESEV [Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation], <https://www.tesev.org.tr/en/home/>, Accessed on July 25, 2022.

27. Tarih Vakfı [History Foundation], <https://tarihvakfi.org.tr/>, Accessed on July 25, 2022.

28. Hafıza Merkezi [Truth Justice Memory Center], <https://hakikatadalethafiza.org/en/>, Accessed on July 25, 2022.

29. KMKD [Association for the Protection of Cultural Heritage], <http://kmkd.org/en/homepage/>, Accessed on July 25, 2022.

30. "European Archaeological Heritage Prize 2019," *European Association of Archaeologists*, 2019, [https://www.e-a-a.org/EAA/Navigation/Prizes\\_and\\_Awards/Heritage\\_Prize\\_2019.aspx](https://www.e-a-a.org/EAA/Navigation/Prizes_and_Awards/Heritage_Prize_2019.aspx), Accessed July 25, 2022.

31. "Fact Sheet – Turkey's Absurd Gezi Trial," *Project on Middle East Democracy*, December 2019, <https://pomed.org/fact-sheet-turkeys-absurd-gezi-trial/>, Accessed on July 25, 2022.

32. Howard Eissenstat, "Civil Society on Trial in Turkey," *Project on Middle East Democracy*, July 17, 2019, <https://pomed.org/civil-society-on-trial-in-turkey/>.

The Gezi defendants, including Kavala, were acquitted in February 2020. While eight other defendants walked free, Kavala was slapped with a new charge within hours, and immediately rearrested. In October 2021, prosecutors launched a new case against Kavala and 50 other Gezi defendants, combining two cases related to the Gezi protests.<sup>33</sup> In April 2022, the Turkish courts sentenced Osman Kavala to a life sentence without parole, while seven other Gezi defendants received prison sentences of 18 years.<sup>34</sup>

The victimization of Kavala has had a chilling effect on Turkey's progressive arts, culture, and education fields, further impoverishing intellectual and cultural life and prompting the exodus of creative classes and cultural institutions. Kavala's plight demonstrates how the concentration of power in the hands of an authoritarian president and the ensuing domination of the judiciary by the executive branch have undermined not only the rule of law and due process, but also done irreparable damage to the country's arts, culture, and education scene.

## The Erosion of the Autonomy of Higher Education Institutions

In 2016, Erdoğan issued a presidential decree giving himself the authority to appoint university rectors from candidates nominated by the Council of Higher Education (*Yükseköğretim Kurulu*, YÖK), an institution already under his tutelage. Previously, Turkey's public universities held democratic elections for faculty members to choose the top three rector candidates, one of whom would then be appointed by the president. The president was expected to appoint the candidate with the most votes, but Erdoğan showed his willingness to disregard the will of the academics by appointing candidates with the fewest votes. Although existing problems associated with the appointment of university rectors and YÖK's incessant meddling in all aspects of academic life were already significant obstacles to any real exercise of academic freedoms in Turkey, Erdoğan's decree excluding the input of academics on the appointment of university rectors erased any semblance of autonomy.

33. Ali Kucukgocmen, "Turkish court opens re-trial in merged Gezi protest cases," October 8, 2021, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkish-court-opens-re-trial-merged-gezi-protest-cases-2021-10-08/>.

34. Kareem Fahim, "Turkish philanthropist sentenced to life term after widely criticized trial," April 26, 2022, *The Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/25/osman-kavala-turkey-Erdoğan/>.

What ultimately brought the sorry state of Turkish universities to the world's attention, however, was the upheaval at Istanbul's Bogazici University. As one of Turkey's top universities and an internationally acclaimed research institution, Boğaziçi was largely untouched in the previous stages of the purge. On January 1, 2021, Erdoğan appointed rectors to five universities through presidential decrees, one of which was Boğaziçi.<sup>35</sup> Melih Bulu, whom Erdoğan appointed as rector, was not even a member of the Boğaziçi faculty at the time of his appointment. His main qualification appeared to be running as a parliamentary candidate within the ranks of Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) back in 2015.

The appointment of an unqualified political figure provoked outrage among Boğaziçi academics and students. Three days after Erdoğan's decree, faculty and students gathered to protest Bulu's appointment, called for his resignation, and demanded the right to choose their rector through elections.<sup>36</sup> The police attacked the peaceful demonstration using excessive force, tear gas, and water cannons.<sup>37</sup> Early the next morning, special operations teams carried out targeted raids on 17 student houses. Over the following weeks, demonstrations in solidarity with Boğaziçi University spread to 38 cities. The authorities detained over 500 protesters. While many were ultimately released, most detained students received travel bans, preventing them from pursuing exchange programs or graduate studies abroad.

One of Bulu's first policies as rector was to shutter Boğaziçi's LGBTI+ Studies Club.<sup>38</sup> Among other student clubs, the LGBTI+ Studies Club was an active participant in the protests, particularly because of the concerns of its members that the new rector would not offer them a safe space on campus. One of the many protest-art pieces exhibited during the demonstrations later became a key point of contention. Erdoğan's supporters claimed that the piece, combining images of the Kaaba and LGBTI+ colors, was an attack on Islamic values.<sup>39</sup> These

35. "Issue Number 31352: Appointment Decisions," January 2, 2021, Official Gazette of the Republic of Turkey, <https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2021/01/20210102-7.pdf>.

36. Carlotta Gall, "Prestigious Istanbul University Fights Erdoğan's Reach," February 1, 2021, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/01/world/asia/turkey-boğaziçi-university-protests-Erdoğan.html>.

37. "Turkey: Student Protesters at Risk of Prosecution," February 18, 2021, *Human Rights Watch*, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/18/turkey-student-protesters-risk-prosecution>.

38. Yiğit E. Korkmaz, "Bull after shutting down the LGBTI+ Club: 'I'm an LGBT rights advocate,'" February 3, 2021, *Kaos GL*, <https://kaosgl.org/en/single-news/bulu-after-shutting-down-the-lgbti-club-i-m-an-lgbt-rights-advocate>.

39. "Boğaziçi University's LGBTI+ Studies Club closed by the appointed rector,"



Photo above: Students hold placards during a demonstration against Melih Bulu's direct appointment as rector of Boğaziçi University on January 6, 2021. Photo by Resul Kaboglu/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images.

blasphemy accusations helped demonize the Boğaziçi protesters and made them targets of religious extremists.

Ultimately, Bulu's term as rector was cut short when Erdoğan replaced him with another loyalist, Naci İnci, in August 2021.<sup>40</sup> İnci intensified the crackdown at Boğaziçi by dismissing deans from their positions and issuing orders preventing certain academics from entering campus.<sup>41 42</sup>

Since January 4, 2021, a vast majority of the Boğaziçi faculty, dressed in their academic gowns, has been gathering in the main quad each day to protest in silence, by turning their

February 2, 2021, *BIA News*, <https://bianet.org/english/lgbti/238535-Boğaziçi-university-s-lgbt-studies-club-closed-by-the-appointed-rector>.

40. Daren Butler and Ali Kucukgocmen, "Turkey university protests not over despite rector's dismissal," July 16, 2021, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-university-protests-not-over-activists-say-2021-07-16/>.

41. "Boğaziçi University's appointed rector fires three elected deans," January 20, 2022, *Duvar English*, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/Boğaziçi-universitys-appointed-rector-naci-inci-fires-three-elected-deans-news-60183>.

42. "Dismissed academic prevented from entering Boğaziçi University by appointed rector's orders," October 11, 2021, *Duvar English*, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/dismissed-academic-can-candan-prevented-from-entering-Boğaziçi-university-by-appointed-rectors-orders-news-59155>.

backs on the rector's office. This ongoing protest is a somber reminder of the loss of the last vestiges of academic freedom and autonomy under the hyper-centralized presidential system. The highly publicized case of Boğaziçi University is the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the near-complete domination of academic institutions and processes across the country.

## The Way Forward

The hyper-centralization of political power remains Turkey's key challenge. Although the country's transition to the presidential system has exacerbated hyper-centralization, the consolidation of one-man rule predates this shift in governance. Erdoğan's first decade in power led to not only his gradual elimination of dissenting voices within the AKP but also a weakening of accountability and transparency in national politics as well as a worrying rise in arbitrary rule. The erosion of separation of powers, checks and balances, the rule of law, and due process became evident for all to see in the aftermath of the Gezi protests.

Turkey's big tent opposition bloc, which now includes two splinter parties from the AKP in addition to other parties spanning the entire political spectrum, is unified in its commitment to rolling back the presidential system and institutionalizing an enhanced parliamentary system. Although a victorious opposition bloc's return to a parliamentary system and the ensuing power-sharing arrangement would contribute to reinstitutionalizing polyarchy, these steps alone would still not suffice to tackle Turkey's hyper-centrist political disposition.

Unless the opposition also launched a robust decentralization program devolving powers to municipalities and local institutions in accordance with the subsidiarity principle, the Turkish bureaucracy's deeply ingrained impulse to hoard all administrative power in Ankara could reinvent hyper-centralism in new forms. So far, the opposition bloc has not articulated such a program and many members of the opposition share a similar aversion to decentralization as members of the ruling coalition.

When it comes to the educational and cultural fields, a key challenge is to abolish or roll back YÖK and provide universities with the administrative, financial, and academic autonomy required to govern themselves and ensure academic freedoms. YÖK, a relic of the 1980 military government, has proved itself to be a resilient institution that has survived numerous left- and right-wing coalitions and can once again reinvent itself in the post-Erdoğan era to amass further resources and power.

One major test for the opposition will be to see if they are willing to let universities, together with their various stakeholders, including academic and non-academic staff, students, municipal governments, and other for-profit and non-profit partners, govern themselves with limited meddling from Ankara. This will prove a significant challenge in the Kurdish-majority provinces, where the Turkish ruling elite's exclusivist prejudices and security concerns could provide pretexts for sustaining a heavy-handed bureaucratic domination over higher education.

Turkey's cultural climate will continue to suffer from a relative lack of freedom of expression, right of assembly, and media and academic freedoms unless key anxieties around ethnic, religious, and gender identities are removed from the purview of Turkey's heavy-handed law enforcement system

and desecuritized. Such a desecuritization process requires not only an institutionalization of rights and freedoms in accordance with Turkey's commitments under the Council of Europe, but also a comprehensive judicial reform and a scaling back of Turkey's oversized security bureaucracy to core security issues bound by strict legal limits.

While the opposition will face significant structural and ideological challenges to rolling back the hyper-centralized system adversely affecting academic and cultural fields, the reelection of Erdoğan and Turkey's Islamist-ultranationalist coalition would exacerbate existing problems to an unprecedented level. An Erdoğan win would do away with the last traces of rights, freedoms, and semi-autonomy, and speed up the presidency's amassing of all forms of power, thereby aggravating arbitrary rule. Such a dystopian trajectory would greatly accelerate the current brain drain from academic and cultural fields, while exacerbating complicity and indifference among academics and intellectuals who remain. The near-total securitization of academic and intellectual activities would also lead to a suffocating atmosphere by undermining the oases of freedom and hope that opposition-run municipalities manage to provide at the local level. This, in turn, would make it even more challenging for a future opposition government to contemplate, articulate, and implement a decentralization policy. Ultimately, such decentralization is the most effective way to tackle Turkey's deepening malaise in educational and cultural affairs.

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