

# World view



By Taner Bilgiç

## Why this election is crucial for Turkish higher education

**Abolishing the council that controls the country's universities would allow higher education to finally blossom.**

**T**he Turkish general election on 14 May could be a watershed moment for our nation's higher education.

I entered university in 1983 as a student; since 1997, I have been a faculty member in industrial engineering at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul. In all that time, Turkish higher education has been under the iron fist of the central Council of Higher Education (YÖK). Imposed after a military coup in 1980, when universities were seen as hotbeds of dissent, this body has far-reaching power over the academic and administrative matters of every university in Turkey, with few to no checks or balances.

In the 11 general elections since the restoration of civilian rule in 1983, political parties have pledged to abolish the YÖK. This includes the Justice and Development Party (AKP) of current president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, which has been in power since 2002. Yet never in 21 years has the AKP attempted to follow through. Like other governments before it, it has instead used the YÖK as a convenient centralized tool for imposing its ideology.

After more than 40 years of this dysfunctional system, higher education in Turkey is in urgent need of reform.

The value of degrees obtained at many of our universities is debatable, and Turkey has the lowest employment rate of university-educated adults among countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. The YÖK is undoubtedly a big part of the problem. Universities have little or no authority to determine their administrative, financial and academic procedures. At public universities, salaries are fixed throughout the country, and tenure decisions are by central peer review.

These systems include perverse incentives. In 1993, Turkey began paying academics for each paper they published internationally. And since 2000, a scoring system dominated by international publications has been used to assess tenure claims. This has boosted the number of publications but has also increased instances of author-citation networks, dishonesty and predatory publishing.

Many talented young scientists have already left the country. More and more of my own students want to pursue their careers abroad.

But I see a real opportunity for change now, partly because science in Turkey is in the public eye as never before. The COVID-19 pandemic and February's devastating earthquakes in southeast Turkey have sent awareness of the value of science soaring. Scientists had been warning the public and policymakers for years about the

**Turkish higher education needs to be rebuilt on a basis of academic freedom and university autonomy."**

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consequences of such an earthquake and had made the scientific evidence readily available. It is clear to many that lives could have been saved had the science been heeded.

What's more, issues of academic freedom have become public talking points. At Boğaziçi University, the longest-running peaceful resistance of faculty members in Turkish academia has been ongoing since 2021, triggered by Erdoğan's appointment of a rector from outside the university with connections to the president's party. Peaceful student and faculty protests and a subsequent wave of disciplinary actions and student arrests caught the public's attention. In response to the protests, the YÖK doubled down, sacking three deans simultaneously, appointing its own replacements and unilaterally establishing schools of law and communications with no senate approval. The appointed rector changed the locks on the Istanbul Center for Mathematical Sciences to keep researchers out.

But this was also something of a turning point. During these events, I was an elected member of the executive board of Boğaziçi University and chair of a senate subcommittee on restructuring university governance, set up in 2016. I was also among the faculty members who filed several lawsuits, some ongoing, against the university and the YÖK regarding the breaches of academic autonomy.

A June 2022 workshop grew out of these efforts, attended by some 45 academics from 13 universities. Our resulting report concluded that Turkish higher education must be rebuilt on a basis of academic freedom and university autonomy. The YÖK should be abolished and a new law should enshrine autonomous legal status for universities. Other principles include: secular, democratic, equitable and inclusive institutions; shared and bottom-up decision-making; accountability; and transparent budgeting.

Our report was sent to all political parties represented in parliament. The AKP's policy statement for the upcoming elections contains no reference to the YÖK. But the AKP is currently running neck and neck in the polls with the Nation Alliance, a coalition of six opposition parties. The alliance has adopted several of our recommendations, including abolishing the YÖK, as part of its platform. On 16 April, along with four colleagues from Boğaziçi University, I met with the alliance's presidential candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who reaffirmed his support for acting on this plan if he assumes power after the elections.

Turkish academics, students and policymakers have the insight, experience and creativity to build a competitive, efficient, decentralized higher-education system. Regardless of who wins the elections, we must hold policymakers to their promises, guided by our fundamental values of academic freedom and university autonomy. Giving us an opportunity to do so will lift the chances of a whole nation.