



The Latest Intervention Against University Autonomy in Turkey

On October 29th, Day of the Republic, the Executive Decree no. 676 issued under conditions of State of Emergency has established a new system to designate university presidents. From now on, presidents of state universities will be appointed by the President of the Republic from among three candidates nominated by the Council of Higher Education (YÖK), and presidents of private foundation universities will be appointed again by the President of the Republic from among three candidates nominated by the board of trustees and approved by YÖK.

This measure is tantamount to the eradication of university autonomy to a large extent. For a university to be autonomous, it must be able to assess its research and education policies and contribution to society in the framework of its own traditions and capabilities. Universities must be home to creative thinking and research. University autonomy is not some abstract concept, but the *sine qua non* for the scientific and technological output of a country, its socio-economic development, and its ability to strengthen its democracy under the influence of new ideas.

Clearly, the issue is not whether the president should be elected by the faculty members or by the board of trustees. The real issue is whether each university will have a say in designating its own president. Universities are not autonomous if they cannot choose their president by means of their own organs, through an assessment process based on their own traditions and methods, but if instead the president is appointed by a central government, in a hierarchical manner, upon the decision of a single individual.

Merit, freedom and integrity are the basic principles which ensure that research and education at universities are carried out in a creative atmosphere conducive to new ideas. A country's best-educated, expert work force must be trained to do their job well, and to employ their mind and will in an honest manner. For this, universities must have an institutional culture that upholds scientific values. Each university must be able to decide on how and by whom it will be managed, according to its own traditions and methods based on its research and education priorities.

Universities lacking robust traditions may tend to elect the candidates of a clique, faction or sect, instead of the best educators or researchers. Nonetheless, such cases do not signify that universities should not elect their managers, but instead that elections not based on merit yield poor results. Universities with robust traditions have designated their managers with success, and continue to prosper as prestigious and prolific institutions.

Appointments made by a central authority, from outside the university, and in the final instance, upon the decision of a single individual, are *certain* to wreak havoc on all universities. This will inflict the greatest damage on the country's most advanced universities, their capacity to educate individuals, and naturally, the country itself. That is because a central authority is not in a position to accurately assess institutions and individuals, does not have sufficient information about them, or tends to elect individuals who will comply. History has shown that such choices have never been the right ones for academic life.

Allowing a central authority, albeit elected by a majority, to decide on how every institution - especially universities where specialization is at the highest level- should conduct its affairs means to entrust the entire country to the supposed infallibility of a single individual in a world where economy and technology advance at an immense pace. This goes against democracy and rationality. As confirmed by all historical examples, such devastation of institutions will eventually harm the entire country.

Furthermore, the Decree itself goes against the legal system in place in Turkey. According the article 121 of the Constitution, "During the state of emergency the Council of Ministers, meeting under the chairmanship of the President of the Republic, may issue decrees having the force of law **on matters necessitated by the state of emergency**. These decrees shall be published in the Official Gazette, and shall be submitted to the Turkish Grand National Assembly **on the same day** for approval; the time limit and procedure for their approval by the Assembly shall be indicated in the Rules of Procedure."

There is no evidence which suggests that the designation of university presidents is one of the "**matters necessitated by the state of emergency**." In fact, this matter unrelated to the grounds leading to a state of emergency was very recently discussed in the Turkish Parliament in the context of a draft law. On August 18th, 2016, the "Draft Law on the Amendment of the Articles Governing University President Elections in the Law of Higher Education" was proposed with a similar content as decree no. 676, however had to be withdrawn after a strong opposition in Parliament. A detailed assessment of this proposal is available in [The Science Academy's Report on Academic Freedoms 2015-2016](#), issued on October 3rd, 2016.

In brief, a draft law recently discussed in Parliament concerning university autonomy, an issue of vital importance for Turkey's welfare and democracy, has been put into effect by means of an executive decree under the state of emergency, although its content is not related to the reasons for the state of emergency.

We are deeply worried in seeing that an unfortunate decision, which goes way beyond the measures following the military coup of September 12th, 1980, has been brought into force with an executive decree that disregards the Parliament's will on the very anniversary of the Republic, dealing yet another heavy blow against university autonomy and representative democracy.

Executive Board of The Science Academy, Turkey
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