



Supporters of Turkey's government celebrate the failed coup on a bridge in Istanbul.

## TURKISH SCIENCE

# After failed coup, Turkey's academics feel regime's wrath

Thousands of researchers and university officials fired, suspended, or told to return home immediately

By John Bohannon

Last week's failed coup attempt in Turkey lasted just a day, but the pain has only begun for Turkish academics. In a massive political purge, the government has suspended or fired thousands of professors and staff at universities, as well as employees of the nation's ministry of education. Officials have also ordered researchers who are affiliated with Turkish universities and working abroad to return home immediately—with an implied threat of treason charges for those who don't.

As a result of the moves, even Turkey's researchers who are still employed "have just lost this entire field and conference season," says Cagan Sekercioglu, an ecologist based at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City who, like other Turks who permanently left their country for academia abroad, is beyond the government's reach.

The 15 July coup attempt was short-lived. Rebel soldiers briefly seized key buildings, bridges, and roads, but Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan quickly reestablished his grip on power. Erdoğan then made an ominous announcement about his opponents: "They will pay a heavy price." Exactly who "they" are remains to be seen.

Many of the protest movements against Erdoğan over the years have originated among academics, which may be why they are one focus of his wrath. In the span of a

few days, Erdoğan fired more than 45,000 civil servants in the military and judiciary, and 15,000 staff members of the ministry of education. Some 21,000 teachers lost their licenses, and more than 1500 university deans have reportedly resigned under pressure. Since then, officials have sacked hundreds more faculty and staff at some universities. It's not clear whether or when those removed from jobs might get them back. Universities have ground to a halt, say sources based in Turkey. On 21 July, Erdoğan tightened his grip by declaring a 3-month state of emergency, which allows him to set curfews, issue decrees, and make arrests without warrants.

The global scientific community is looking on with dismay. "[We are] alarmed by the repressive and excessive nature of recent measures against several public sectors in Turkey, including the academic and research community," reads an open letter published last week by the European Federation of Academies of Sciences and Humanities. The purge is not a proportional reaction, says Martin Chalfie, chair of the Committee on Human Rights at the U.S. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine in Washington, D.C. "Protecting national security should not be incompatible with safeguarding fundamental rule of law and human rights principles."

Turkish law does give Erdoğan broad authority over Turkey's 180 universities. Although each campus chooses its rector through a nominally democratic process in

which faculty members vote for candidates, the ministry of education has the final say. "The university rarely gets its top choice," says Caghan Kizil, a Turkish molecular biologist based at the Dresden University of Technology in Germany. As a result, Erdoğan's allies occupy key slots, as the aftermath of the coup has made clear. "The university rectors asked their deans to resign and the implication was clear: Resign or you will be accused of treason and arrested," Kizil says.

For some Turkish academics, the government's response has mostly spelled inconvenience, at least so far. Graduate students have had to at least temporarily abandon visiting research posts that they had won through prestigious programs, such as the European Union's Erasmus Mundus scholarship. Postdoctoral researchers planning to travel abroad are in limbo. "A Turkish postdoc who was going to come to my lab had to cancel and lost a month's rent," Utah's Sekercioglu says. Turkish universities have been contacting their researchers abroad, but some are still waiting for any word. "Nobody has called me back yet," says a Turkish scientist on sabbatical at a U.S. university who requested anonymity. The purge troubles him, he says, but he is "very glad that the coup did not succeed."

Many academics fear the clampdown is just the beginning. It is a sign that "academic freedoms will no longer exist" in Turkey, predicts Sinem Arslan, a Turk doing doctoral work in political science at the University of Essex in the United Kingdom. The government has urged rectors to hand over the names of university members suspected of having ties to coup organizers, academics report; many fear the move will encourage ideological blacklisting. Government officials "want to take the universities under their full control," Arslan says. "I don't think that anybody will be able to work on research areas that are considered taboo by the government or write anything that criticizes the government." Erdoğan has been hostile to the women's rights movement, for example, and to academics who express support for the country's Kurdish minority (*Science*, 25 March, p. 1381).

Many see the purge as an opportunistic power grab by the ruling Justice and Development Party, and maintain that plans to quash dissent have been in the works for years. Critics of the government had hoped to find embarrassing evidence of those plans in nearly 300,000 internal government emails released by the organization WikiLeaks days after the coup. But the cache, which includes emails dating back 2010, has so far yielded little. ■

# Science

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