

# Power of the pen

*Scientists must unite to stop Turkey from removing the right to freedom of expression.*

When he labelled outspoken academics as terrorists, Turkey's increasingly authoritarian President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was probably not thinking of Voltaire's eighteenth-century philosophical maxim: "To hold a pen is to be at war".

Erdoğan sent shivers down the spines of those who care about human rights by declaring on 14 March that those who support terrorists are as guilty as those "who pull the trigger", and that Turkish law should be changed to reflect this. "The fact that an individual is a deputy, an academic, an author, a journalist or the director of an NGO does not change the fact that that person is a terrorist," he said.

One the same day, three academics from universities in Istanbul were hauled into police custody and then refused bail while prosecutors considered charges of making propaganda for a terrorist organization.

Their crime? In January, they had signed a petition that called for an end to violence in the southeast of the country, where government forces have been fighting Kurdish separatists. The petition was signed by 1,128 academics, mostly from Turkish universities, when it was publicly launched on 11 January. It immediately sparked Erdoğan's rage. Many politically appointed university rectors leapt into line, launching disciplinary investigations into members of their staff who had signed — more than 500 so far. Dozens of signatories were brought in for police questioning. The harsh response attracted a shocked solidarity. Another 1,000 people signed the petition, including a large number of Western scientists, before it was closed on 20 January.

An atmosphere of uncertainty and fear prevails. None of the signatories knows whether they, too, will be arrested, and several have

had death threats. Some have actively sought sabbaticals abroad; those working outside the country are afraid to return even to visit family.

Meanwhile, Turkey is playing a major part on the world political stage, in a role that is overshadowing the fate of the academics.

Turkey is a geopolitical fulcrum. On one side it borders war-torn Middle East, on the other, strife-ridden Europe that is struggling to cope with the refugee crisis. When the country reached a historic agreement with the European Union last week to take back migrants who were crossing into Europe illegally, many in the EU complained bitterly about making a deal with Erdoğan because of his worrying human-rights record.

Terrorist attacks in Turkey are intensifying, some carried out by Kurdish separatists, others by the Islamist group ISIS. Erdoğan's controversial announcement followed on the heels of a deadly attack in Ankara, and on 19 March, a suicide bomber killed four in Istanbul. Kurdish separatist terrorism had abated during a two-year ceasefire, but that broke down last July. Erdoğan argues that the peace petition, by focusing only on government military attacks on Kurdish militants, which have killed many innocent civilians, and ignoring terrorist attacks and other serious human-rights abuses carried out by the separatists, actively supports terrorism.

While appreciating the urgency of a call to peace, many scientists and academics themselves have reservations about the petition, seeing it as unhelpfully confrontational and even intellectually dishonest. But many have still bravely spoken up for the freedom of expression of the signatories.

Turkey's recently formed Science Academy published a strongly supportive statement in January. "The right to express one's opinions — even if these might be annoying or minority views — is an essential freedom of every citizen and every academic," it said. The academy should know — it was created by those who resigned en masse from the Turkish Academy of Sciences when Erdoğan took it over by decree in 2011. Scientists everywhere should use their pens and send their support. ■

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