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# Illiberal democracy and the erosion of academic freedom in the ‘new’ Türkiye

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## Abstract

In the aftermath of 9/11, Türkiye's democratic path has been questioned due to the debates on Islam's compatibility with Western liberal democracy. The central puzzle of this article is to analyse how Türkiye's initial trajectory of democratization took an illiberal turn with the erosion of academic freedom under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), deviating from the expectations of a transition from electoral to liberal democracy. After establishing the conceptual and theoretical framework in the first part, the next one summarizes the Turkish paradoxical engagement with liberal democracy and military coups throughout the twentieth century and their impact on academic freedom. The third part focuses on democratic backsliding and a silent regime change under the AKP rule. The last one analyses the symbiotic relationship between the attacks on academic freedom and 'the rise of illiberal democracy' in the 'new' Türkiye. The article concludes by arguing that the erosion of academic freedom reflects Türkiye's deepening democratic backsliding and increasing culture of fear and self-censorship during the consolidation of illiberal democracy.

## Keywords

Academic freedom, illiberal democracy, self-censorship, culture of fear, Justice and Development Party, Türkiye

## Introduction

When Türkiye's first pro-Islamic government came to power, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP) leaders promised democratization, a fight against corruption and educational reform. During the AKP governance since 2002, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has led his party to victory in five general elections. After being the longest-serving Prime Minister, he became the first elected President in 2014. Erdoğan extended his rule into a third decade in the 'new' Türkiye by winning the Presidential election for the second time against the main opposition

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**Table 1.** The world's population lacking access to academic freedom.

	1973 (%)	2023 (%)
Status Group A: Fully Free	15.3	14.1
Status Group B: Mostly Free	24.2	21.1
Status Group C: Moderately Restricted	5.2	8.4
Status Group D: Severely Restricted	11.7	11.0
Status Group E: Completely Restricted	43.5	45.5

Data source: V-Dem Institute (2024).

Republican People's Party's (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) candidate, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, in 2023. This was also the year when Türkiye aimed to make progress with the so-called 'AKP's 2023 vision,' whose main goal, among others, was to become an information society and elevate the country to the world's top ten economies in the twenty-first century (AKP Manifesto, 2012: 47). Adversely, in 2023, Türkiye has become one of ten countries where 'academic freedom substantially worsened,' sharing this category with Bangladesh, India and the United States of America (US) as well as with Afghanistan and Russia in the list of Status Group E of the Academic Freedom Index (AFI) (V-Dem Institute, 2024; see Table 1).

There is strong evidence in AFI datasets and in the extensively growing comparative literature that various forms of pressure and restriction have been imposed on academic freedom globally (Bilgrami, 2016; Ignatieff, 2024; Kneuer, 2023; Watermeyer et al., 2022). Increasing evidence suggests that Türkiye's trajectory is like that of Hungary and Poland in Europe, India and Russia in Asia and Brazil and Venezuela in South America. Nevertheless, the case of Türkiye stands out as the Muslim country with the longest democratic experience in-between Europe and the Middle East. In the aftermath of 9/11, Türkiye's democratic path has been questioned due to the debates on Islam's compatibility with Western liberal democracy. The central puzzle of this article is to analyse how Türkiye's initial trajectory of democratization took an illiberal turn with the erosion of academic freedom under the AKP, deviating from the expectations of a transition from electoral to liberal democracy (Diamond, 1996; Huntington, 1993: 271).

After establishing the conceptual and theoretical framework in the first part, the next part summarizes the Turkish paradoxical engagement with liberal democracy and military coups throughout the twentieth century and their impact on academic freedom. The third part focuses on democratic backsliding and a silent regime change under the AKP rule. The last one analyses the symbiotic relationship between the attacks on academic freedom and 'the rise of illiberal democracy' in the 'new' Türkiye (Göl, 2017; Zakaria, 1997). The article concludes by arguing that the erosion of academic freedom reflects Türkiye's deepening democratic backsliding and increasing culture of fear and self-censorship during the consolidation of illiberal democracy.

## Conceptual and theoretical framework

Following the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Conference of Higher Education in 1997, the International Association of Universities defined the principle of academic freedom as 'the freedom of members of the academic community – that is scholars, teachers, and students – to follow their scholarly activities within a framework determined by that community in respect to ethical rules and international standards, and without outside pressure' (International Association of Universities [IAU], 1998: 2; UNESCO, 1997). In the twenty-first century, academic freedom has become a more comprehensive concept as 'a condition for the realization of the right to education at all levels' and it is a 'human right,' not a professional

freedom limited to universities only (United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 2024). While academic freedom is at the heart of human rights and scientific progress, it is also a crucial ‘indicator of a liberal democracy’ (Cole, 2017).

Grounded in this theoretical framework, the article employs a mixed-method approach by combining evidence from the AFI’s expert-coded datasets as part of the Variety of Democracies’ (V-Dem) new global time-series comparative statistics, and Freedom House data, with a critical analysis of democratization. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the erosion of academic freedom and democratic backsliding, tracing their gradual progression in a ‘sequential’ manner towards the consolidation of illiberal democracy (Kneuer, 2023; Spannagel and Kinzelbach, 2023). According to the V-Dem Institute (2024), the ‘proportion of the world’s population who lack access to academic freedom’ in ‘completely restricted’ countries (Group E), where Turkey belongs in 2023 (43.5 %), is almost similar to where they were 50 years ago in 1973 (45.5%) (Table 1).

Throughout the twentieth century, Turkish historical experience proved the theoretical and empirical claims that holding free, competitive, and multiparty elections was insufficient to establish a democratic system. As Diamond (1996) differentiated between electoral democracy and liberal democracy, holding elections is only one of the criteria for being democratic. According to Huntington’s (1993: 9) argument in *the Third Wave*, ‘[e]lections, open, free, and fair, are the essence of democracy, the inescapable sine qua non’. However, the minimalist definition of democracy in terms of free, ‘fair, honest and periodic elections’ was never sufficient because, democratically elected governments ‘may end democracy by abolishing or severely limiting democratic procedures’, as in the case of ‘Turkey in the late 1950s’ (Huntington, 1997: 7–8). In the 1990s, Türkiye was considered one of the ‘electoral democracies’ for almost half a century with an expectation that it might transition to liberal democracy as part of the third wave (Huntington, 1997: 9). Therefore, the puzzle is why such a transition took an illiberal turn under the AKP rule in the twenty-first century.

In ‘The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,’ Zakaria further criticized the minimalist definition by differentiating ‘liberal democracy’ from ‘constitutional liberalism’ and highlighted the importance of ‘the rule of law, a separation of powers, and the protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion and property’ (Zakaria, 1997: 22). More importantly, Zakaria argued that ‘[i]lliberal democracies gain legitimacy, and thus strength, from the fact that they are reasonable democratic’ (Zakaria, 1997: 42). A similar critique was articulated by John Shattuck, the former rector and President of Central European University (2009–2016), that illiberal democracies reject not only the idea of the rule of law, an independent judiciary, and ‘governmental pluralism involving the division of power among multiple branches of government, basic civil liberties’ but also ‘an independent civil society and individual rights, particularly freedom of expression by the individuals and the press, freedom from government censorship, and freedom of artistic expression’ (Shattuck, 2016 in Cole, 2017: 865). Moreover, as Cole argues, one of the key indicators ‘(of course not the sole indicator) of the existence and form of a liberal democracy’ is ‘the institutionalization and commitment to academic freedom’ (Cole, 2017: 862). Positioned within this theoretical framework, the following section critically analyses the origins of the paradoxical relationship between democracy and academic freedom in Türkiye throughout the twentieth century.

## **Turkish march to democracy and academic freedom during the twentieth century**

Academic freedom has always been volatile in Türkiye, but it has been severely eroded under the AKP governance (Göl, 2022). The modern Turkish nation-state was established in 1923 after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War One. The legacy of the Ottoman state, with its strong military, left an imprint on the Turkish transition to democracy. Although the history

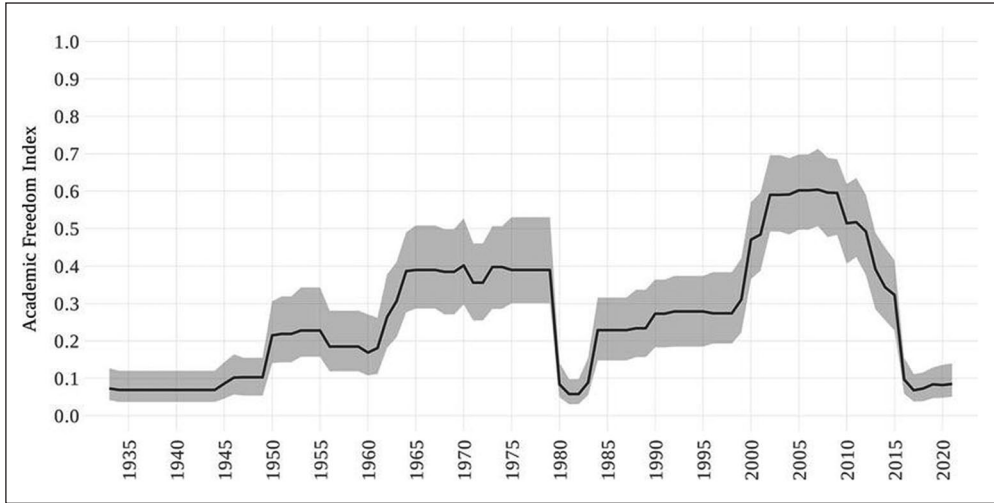
of democratic reforms can be traced back to the Ottoman *Tanzimat* (reforms) era of constitutional trial, this was a brief socio-historical experience, insufficient to compare it to Western liberal democracy. Only after World War Two did the Turkish one-party rule change to a multiparty system in 1946. Thereafter, military coups interrupted Turkish politics almost every decade (1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997 soft coup) (Huntington, 1993: 20). During the Cold War, the pendulum of academic freedom swung from one end to the other by the motion of democratic progress, just like the Turkish march as one-step-forward and two-step-backward. Türkiye's democratization trajectory began to deviate from Huntington's theory, 'the democratization waves and the reverse waves suggest a two-step-forward, one-step-backward pattern' (Huntington, 1993: 25).

During the first half of the twentieth century, 'the promotion of human rights and democracy' was part of American foreign policy (Huntington, 1993: 91). Turkish transition to democracy was supported by the US, as one of the superpowers taking over the responsibilities in the Middle East from the British and French Empires and more importantly promoting American democracy in the region. Turkish geographical proximity to the Soviet Union and the Straits made Ankara a crucial strategic US ally during the Cold War. In this article, therefore, the 'symbiotic relationship between academic freedom and democracy' in Türkiye is also related to the role of international relations, specifically in the context of US democracy promotion (Göl, 2022; Huntington, 1993: 93–94).

When the Truman Doctrine, aimed at containing Soviet geopolitical expansion and the communist threat, shaped American foreign affairs under the Democratic President H.S. Truman, Türkiye, alongside Greece, became the subject of the new policy in 1948. Subsequently, Türkiye became a member of the Council of Europe in 1949 and of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1952. Following the first free elections in Turkish history in May 1950, the Democrat Party under the leadership of Adnan Menderes, won two more elections in 1954 and 1957. The Menderes government's pro-American policies had a direct impact on the Turkish higher education system, as exemplified by the opening of the first 'modern' university based on the American model, the Middle East Technical University (METU) in Ankara, in 1956. This period had a promising trend of increasing academic freedom. Ankara first applied as an associate member of the European Economic Community in 1959, becoming another international actor to influence Turkish democratization.

Within this international context, the creation of an American-supported university, METU, served as an example for other Middle Eastern countries, not only reforming Turkish higher education but also promoting American values and political ideals in the region (Göl, 2022; Weiker, 1962: 293). The rule of democracy was a core value to be exported through education (Glaeser et al., 2006). This rule also complemented American foreign policy, including Türkiye within American-led international security institutions and promoting democracy in the Middle East (Huntington, 1993: 246). However, neither academic freedom nor liberal democracy fully flourished. Due to Türkiye's geostrategic importance during the Cold War, US military and security interests were prioritized over democracy promotion by the American Presidents succeeding D.D. Eisenhower. For example, when the first back step of Türkiye's fledgling democracy was taken by the *coup d'état* of 1960, neither the military intervention in politics nor the decrease of academic freedom was criticized by the succeeding US administrations, as this pattern repeated itself throughout the twentieth century (see Figure 1).

When Türkiye returned to civilian rule after the first military coup in 1961, a new constitution introduced liberal and civil rights, which granted universities unlimited authority and accepted new academic reforms (T.C. *Resmî Gazete*, 1961). For the first time, the Constitution (Article 120) progressively secured the academic and administrative autonomy of universities. Interpreted retrospectively, this was the initial indirect referral to the existence of academic freedom in Turkish history. However, any debate related to academic freedom was related to the issue of university

**Figure 1.** Academic freedom index scores for Türkiye between 1933 and 2021.

Data Source: V-Dem 2022: v12. The grey area represents the confidence bounds of data.

autonomy. The military coup of 1971, described as a ‘half coup’ by Huntington, briefly led to academic freedom drop (Huntington, 1993: 20). Between the two military coups in 1960 and 1971, there was a period of direct assaults on academic freedom, but the lowest level was reached after the 1980 coup (see Figure 1). With the return to civilian rule, a new constitution was penned in 1973, introducing further university reforms (T.C. *Resmi Gazete*, 1973). Most faculty members were dismissed due to their assumed political links, and therefore, on illegitimate and unfair grounds. The following military *coup d’état* was ‘a full-scale military takeover in 1980’ that pushed democratic reforms backwards, and attacks on academic freedoms deepened (Huntington, 1993: 20; Toprak, 2014: 180). The university autonomy and liberties introduced by the 1960 Constitution were criticized as being the cause of ideological conflicts between right-wing and left-wing students and academics. The sharp drop in academic freedom resulted from the military junta’s decision to reverse the civil liberties protected in the 1960 Constitution, which identified Turkish ‘democratic backsliding’ as a promissory in future (Göl, 2022).

After the 1980 military coup, a new set of restrictions on academic freedom and university autonomy was imposed: the headscarf ban, and the campus surveillance were two crucial restrictions that had implications for the future of Turkish democracy. Furthermore, the 1982 Constitution imposed a highly centralized structure on the higher education institutions and reinforced the notion that university autonomy is, by default, equivalent to academic freedom. Furthermore, the Higher Education Council (HEC – YÖK) was established in 1982 according to Law 2547, which remains in force. Some amendments were made in 2013, as will be discussed later (Seggie and Gökbel, 2014: 20). Undoubtedly, establishing the YÖK to centrally control higher education as a council appointed by government authorities was one of the most significant institutional constraints on academic freedom. As evidenced by the sudden drop in the AFI index, the 1980 coup significantly harmed academic freedom at various levels and had a severe impact on universities (see Figure 1). Turkish democracy’s next forward step led to a steep increase in academic freedom near the global average at the turn of the new century when the AKP came to power, and the puzzle is why it was not sustained when the external environment of consolidating democracy was ‘quite favourable’ (Huntington, 1993: 273).



## Democratic backsliding and silent regime change in the twenty-first century

Initially, the AKP governments improved the economy and social injustice issues by addressing cultural and individual rights, including lifting the headscarf ban that created a progressive image of a ‘Muslim democracy’ at home and abroad. One of the AKP’s visions and popular slogans was to carry the ‘new’ Türkiye into the new century by speeding its incorporation into the neoliberal order. While they embraced economic liberalism, the AKP leaders described themselves as ‘conservative democrats,’ and they promised to be the agents of change by tackling inequalities and the injustices of the old regime – that is, the establishment, deep state and secular intellectuals (AKP Manifesto, 2012). As part of identified social justice issues, the AKP’s promises were based on the idea of raising a conservative, pious generation and promoting ‘inclusive education’ in line with the AKP’s ‘conservative democrat’ political identity in ‘Turkey’s 2023 Education Vision’ (*Politics Today*, 2018; AKP Manifesto, 2012; Toker, 2021: 1).

Despite the AKP leaders’ self-definition of ‘conservative democrats’ with promises of advanced democratization and promoting inclusive education, the erosion of academic freedom continued (AKP Manifesto, 2012). In the past, the secular regime’s attacks, and political actions on university professors, such as the cases of Şerif Mardin and Aydın Yalçın, were justified in the name of protecting Turkish national security. Traditionally, the universities were perceived by the establishment and military as mostly the bastions of secular intellectuals who were standing against ‘Islamic fundamentalism,’ but their autonomy had to be controlled within a centralized HEC system (Huntington, 1993: 282). Although the AKP leaders were committed to economic liberalization to position the ‘new’ Türkiye in the neoliberal order, within which universities are commonly seen as liberal public spaces with the pursuit of progress and dissemination of knowledge, they were not enthusiastic about political liberalization. Either way, as Huntington suggests, ‘[I]liberalisation may or may not lead to full-scale democratization’ (Huntington, 1993: 9). In addition to the previous governments’ reluctant engagement with academic freedom and full-scale democratization, the AKP targeted controlling the ‘power–knowledge nexus’ within the higher education system as part of a silent regime change in a ‘sequential’ manner (Göl, 2022; Kneuer, 2023).

Consequently, the government control of universities increased through the new interventions in higher education’s governance and its imposed hierarchical structure. Because the AKP regime suspected that the ‘secular’ academe and its discontented intellectuals could pose a threat to the party’s remaining in power and its pious leaders, it led them to implement the new measures of control. The AKP’s decision to change the name of HEC to the Turkish Council of Higher Education (CoHE) seemed cosmetic, but, in fact, it consolidated the end of universities’ institutional autonomy and increased the centralization of authority. In Turkish academia, research in the humanities is categorized as a threat to national security if it is related to a few politically controversial topics, such as the headscarf ban, the Armenian genocide and the Kurdish question. The dismissal of dissident academics intensified in the name of protecting these socio-historically ‘sensitive’ and politically controversial issues of Turkish national and security interests. Between 2001 and 2005, the first distinct event was the dismissal of Bülent Tanör, who was a Professor of Law at Istanbul University, for authoring the report *Perspectives on Democratisation in Turkey*, which was critical of the constitution and the education system and seen as politically motivated (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2004: 14–15).<sup>1</sup> The other well-known sociologist, İsmail Beşikçi, who researched the Kurdish question, was imprisoned for seventeen years. Another prominent political scientist, Büşra Ersanlı, was sentenced to eighteen months for propagandizing for a terrorist organization, after signing the petition for ‘Academics for Peace’ (AfP) and researching the Armenian question and *Dersim* massacre (Başer et al., 2017; SAR, 2018). The attacks on intellectuals and critical scholars in Erdoğan’s ‘new’ Türkiye share similar patterns with those in Orban’s Hungary, Duda’s Poland and Modi’s India

(Cole, 2017: 865). This comparison suggests that the symbiotic relationship between the erosion of academic freedom and democratic backsliding is not specific to a unique culture or religion, but rather depends on the will of the political leadership (Huntington, 1993: 316).

In Türkiye's case, the AKP pragmatically established a coalition of conservative democrats, right-wing nationalists, religious fundamentalists, and an emerging Muslim bourgeoisie (*Müstakil Sanayici ve İşadamları Derneği*) as the advocates of democratization and economic development, positioning the 'new' Türkiye in the neoliberal order. However, the AKP, under the leadership of Erdoğan, step by step weakened the strongholds of a secular state that blurred the line between religion and the state – *din ve devlet* – by controlling the legislative, executive and judicial branches, the army's top ranks, the key economic decision-making (the Central Bank, *Merkez Bankası*) and 'reconfiguring most of media ownership' by state interventions (Tansel, 2018: 200). Moreover, the AKP leadership has planned an ultra-conservative re-education programme for producing and disseminating a religiously inspired pedagogy in which anything tainted with the stamp of secular origin would be contested and replaced. The process of 'Islamization' of education was part of a subtle, gradual change in family–faith relations and policies of the Ministry of National Education (Toker, 2021: 1).<sup>2</sup> For example, the AKP banned the teaching of Darwinian evolution theory and then moved to the most controversial issue in Turkish society: the headscarf ban (Haber Turk, 2017; Göl, 2022).

As a 'Muslim and secular' country, the headscarf ban was at the heart of tensions between the pious and secular in Turkish politics and democracy (Göl, 2009). The (in)visibility of women in Islam exposed the complexity of relations between education, religion, and politics in national and international affairs, especially in the post-9/11 era. As mentioned earlier, the HEC imposed the headscarf ban following the military junta in the 1980s. All faculty members and students were expected to wear modest clothes and headscarves were banned for female students in line with the secular character of the state. Although the ban was 'imposed in the name of secularism as a barrier to the perceived threat of encroachment of Islam into the political field,' the universities did not apply the rules consistently during the 1980s and 1990s (HRW, 2004: 3 and 27). Following the 1997 soft coup, the ban was tightened, but its implementation varied from one university to another during the AKP governance. For instance, while female students were allowed to cover their heads when studying the Quran and the university entry system was adjusted to favour students graduated from clerical training schools (*imam-hatip liseleri*), academic staff and students wearing headscarves were not allowed to enter any faculty of Istanbul University in the late-1990s (HRW, 2004: 5 and 30). Implementing different policies regarding the headscarf ban created inequalities in women's individual rights and restricted the freedom of learning and violated their freedom of religion (Göl, 2022; HRW, 2004: 24).

Since the establishment of the secular republic, the headscarf issue has always been a double-edged sword in Turkish society and politics. As part of Türkiye's 'authoritarian secularism,' the headscarf ban was criticized by all walks of life for being unjust and unequal (Göl, 2009: 789). The ban exposed the paradox of Turkish democracy and secularism by restricting freedom of learning contradictorily: firstly, it created gender inequality because the ban took away the educational rights of only female students, who wore headscarves as symbol of their cultural identity and discriminated them against male students; and secondly, the freedom of expression as one of the fundamental rights of those female students, who uncovered their heads to have access to higher education, was severely violated in the name of a secular lifestyle (Seggie and Gökbel, 2014: 26). The ban damaged equal opportunities and contradicted the logic of Turkish modernization, which championed women's rights, inclusive education, and gender equality. Throughout the twentieth century, the headscarf ban remained one of the unresolved social injustice issues in Türkiye that needed to be addressed (Göl, 2022).



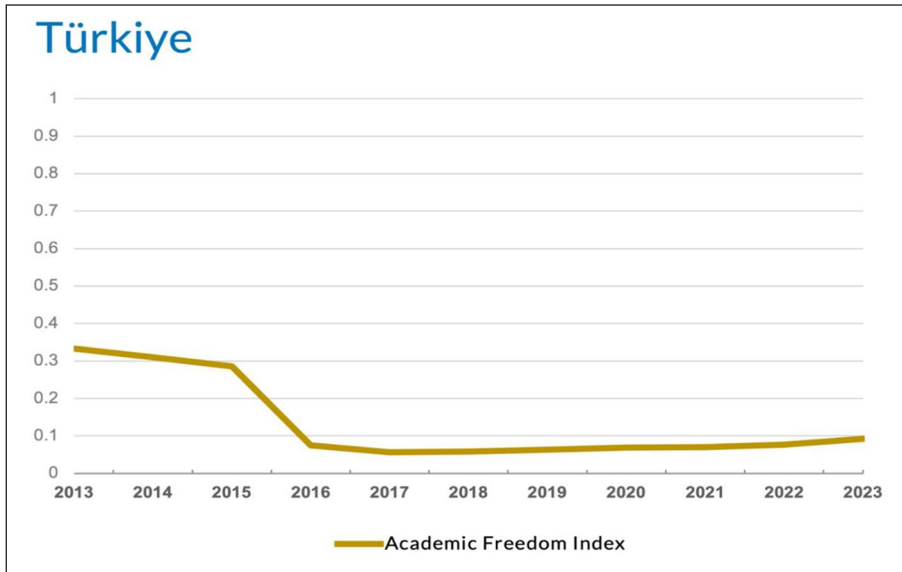
Interestingly, the AKP leadership did not identify the headscarf issue as a priority when they came to power. After achieving economic development during their first decade in power (2002–2012), the AKP leadership included the ban in their agenda tactically as part of the silent regime change. When a female student wearing a headscarf petitioned the CoHE because she was forced to leave a classroom at a state university, the issue was put on the AKP's agenda. The headscarf ban was virtually lifted in 2010 as part of the government's initiatives to reform universities. Three years later, women were permitted to wear the headscarf in state institutions, including parliament, but with exceptions in the military, police, and judiciary (Karahan and Tuğsuz, 2022). In 2014, the Islamic headscarf was allowed in high schools. The military, as the guardians of secularism, was the last institution where the ban was lifted in 2017, following the policewomen who were allowed to wear headscarves a year earlier (*Daily News*, 2016, 2017). While this gradual progress appeared to indicate equality and democratization on the surface, it was a tactful strategy employed by the AKP leadership as they advanced to the next stage of silent regime change, aiming to consolidate illiberalism, which I will address next.

### **Illiberal democracy and an increasing culture of fear in the 'new' Türkiye**

Increasing security threats in international relations following the Arab Spring of 2011, the Syrian crisis of 2012 and the rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014, made a stable Türkiye under the 'democratically' elected AKP government a prerequisite for Western, mainly US and European Union (EU), interests in the Middle East. When Huntington's theory of 'economic development makes democracy possible; political leadership makes it real' applied to Türkiye, both domestic and external environments were 'quite favourable' to the transition to liberal democracy (Huntington, 1993: 316). During the first decade of the AKP regime, Erdoğan's approach to politics, as evident in his economic liberalization and initial democratization measures, aimed at advancing Türkiye's integration into the EU, was promising. In liberal democracies, the liberalization of laws concerning the freedom to learn and teach is essential and a precondition for progress. One of the most critical ways for the AKP government to achieve international standards in higher education was to improve academic freedom. As argued earlier, academic freedom is 'an indicator of a liberal democracy,' and some initiatives aimed to make progress in this direction within the AKP leadership (Cole, 2017). However, in the second decade of the AKP rule (2013–2023), as AFI data exhibit, Türkiye's academic freedom continued to decline despite promising initiatives (see Figure 2).

In 2013, Gökhan Çetinsaya, as the President of the CoHE then, heralded the 'Academic Freedom Declaration,' which was part of the AKP's liberalization policies (Seggie and Gökbel, 2014: 29). This was the most comprehensive expression of academic freedom made by any Turkish government. It highlighted the fact that the CoHE was established by the military regime, which exercised anti-democratic policies between the 1981 military coup and the 1997 soft coup. Within this draft, debates centred on modifying the CoHE regulation and the article that restricted faculty members from issuing statements on official matters beyond their scientific research. These suggested changes were in line with the so-called '2023 vision,' as mentioned earlier. Neither Çetinsaya's suggestions for democratizing the CoHE and improving academic freedoms nor the AKP's promise of tackling gender inequality in education materialized during the AKP's second decade in power.

Initially, under the framework of international treaties and the Turkish Constitution, the CoHE issued a Gender Equality Attitude Document to address gender inequality in higher education; however, it subsequently removed it from its website in 2019. They also cancelled the 'Gender Equality Project' because it was 'unsuitable to the norms and values of Turkish society' (Hünler, 2023: 158). The CoHE then implemented further changes so that most gender and women's

**Figure 2.** Academic freedom index between 2013 and 2023.

Data Source: SAR, Free to Think, 2024: 66.

research centres became ‘family’ studies centres focusing on ‘gender justice’ in practice (Hünler, 2023: 158). As a result of Ankara’s continuing international commitments, such as the United Nations and European Parliament, the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye (TUBITAK) issued a ‘Gender Equality Action Plan’ for 2022–2025 (TUBITAK, 2022), but Türkiye ranks 68th in the Global Inequality Index despite its 54th place in the Human Development Index in 2019 (United Nations Development Programme Turkey, 2022).

During the AKP’s second decade in power, the following events heralded the downward spiral of Turkish democracy and academic freedom: the Gezi Park protests; the AfP petition; and the failed coup attempt.

Firstly, the Gezi Park resistance took place in 2013, which began in reaction to the planned destruction of a park in Istanbul but spread to Ankara and other major cities, where around 2.5 million people from all walks of life took to the streets and public squares in peaceful anti-government protests. In response, the AKP government allowed the harsh repressions and excessive use of violence by police forces (della Porta, 2013: 153). The regime’s disproportionate response to the protesters damaged its ‘democratic’ image in international public opinion. It was clear that the tensions in state–society relations were not about the secular establishment against the Turkish Islamic society, but rather about the ‘democratization’ that the AKP leaders reluctantly signed up for. The AKP leadership reacted in a similar manner to the previous governments’ authoritarian tendencies, with increased violations of human rights and attacks on academic freedom. Following the Gezi protests, the ‘new’ Türkiye has become ahead of the curve in prosecuting academics, journalists, and anti-government voices more than China and Iran. As the AFI identifies, systemic clampdown on academic freedom has increased in Türkiye since 2013, with growing restrictions on higher education during the last decade (see Figure 2; Norris, 2024).

Secondly, the ‘Kurdish question’ remained unresolved and became a politically charged issue to be manipulated by the AKP regime’s ideological aims. For many Kurds, as citizens of the Turkish Republic, their minority rights were oppressed because they were banned from speaking their

mother tongue – Kurdish – in public places. Throughout the twentieth century, the use of Kurdish in public education or studying it as a second language was illegal – those who demanded their language rights faced prosecution and repression. When the AKP came to power, it legalized the teaching of Kurdish in 2002 to advance Ankara’s EU candidacy (Göl, 2022). Although Kurdish is still not taught in public or private educational institutions, the EU’s leverage over improving minority rights was noticeable during the AKP’s first decade in power. When more than 2000 academics signed the AfP petition in January 2016 to condemn the Turkish state’s security operations in the Kurdish southeast and call on the government to seek a peaceful resolution of the decades-long Kurdish question, the deepening of democratic backsliding became visible (Başer et al., 2017). The AKP government’s response was a brutal crackdown on the scholars and it charged more than 700 of them for making propaganda for the Kurdish terrorist organization (Kurdistan Workers’ Party – *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*). President Erdoğan himself declared in a speech that the academics were guilty of making ‘terror propaganda’ (Göl, 2022). The Scholars at Risk’s (SAR) 2016 report gave special attention to Türkiye when a series of criminal and administrative investigations against the signatures of the ‘peace petition’ were launched, and ‘many have since been suspended and/or dismissed from their positions, while others have been detained, arrested and prosecuted’ (Cole, 2017: 863). Many others were blacklisted on lists published by pro-government media outlets and subjected to intimidation campaigns (Scholars at Risk [SAR], 2016: 9–10).

Thirdly, the failed coup attempt of July 2016 accelerated Turkish democratic backsliding, the worst attacks on academic freedoms that dropped the country to the bottom group of AFI (Status Group E) in 2024 (see Table 1). This time, around 6,000 of 150,000 academics had been dismissed from public universities under emergency decrees, which were declared as part of a general crackdown on public employees with alleged ties to the illegal ‘Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organization’ (FETO).<sup>3</sup> Around 50,000 people had been arrested, and more than 140,000 had been fired from state offices, including the civil service, the judiciary, the military, the media, and universities, due to their assumed connections to the Gülen movement and/or their support for terrorist activities. The imprisoning, firing, and blacklisting of many dissident academics, journalists and intellectuals both in and outside Türkiye resulted in a purge that has never been seen in its history and pushed academic freedoms to the lowest level. The purge resulted in a government witch-hunt that created a culture of fear, ‘when thousands of higher education professionals were caught up in sweeping actions taken in response to the failed July 15 coup attempt’ (SAR, 2016: 5 in Cole, 2017: 863). In the aftermath of the 2016 purge, Türkiye’s Freedom House ratings declined from ‘partly free’ in 2016 to ‘not free’ in 2024 (Freedom House, 2024). Furthermore, the latest Freedom House Report classified Türkiye as ‘not free,’ with a dramatic decline in the aggregate freedom score of -27 (see Table 2; Freedom House Report, 2024).

Finally, the AKP regime’s crackdown on universities and academic freedom has fed into a political culture of fear, apprehension, and self-censorship on university campuses. Although the state of emergency ended in 2018, the AKP’s attacks on academic freedoms continued. Following the 2016 failed putsch, the AKP’s AFI score dropped to 0.07, closer to the level in 1981 (0.06) (see Figure 1). After the regime change to a presidential system from a parliamentary one in July 2018, investigations and trials on terrorism charges, as well as the erosion of institutional autonomy at universities, increased to an unprecedented level. In 2023, Türkiye’s academic freedom score of 0.09 placed it in the bottom 10 per cent in the world, and the AFI ranked it as ‘completely restricted’ (see Table 1 and Figure 2). When President Erdoğan appointed a new rector to Boğaziçi University in 2021, academics and students organized silent protests. Sixteen faculty members were dismissed, including Can Candan and Mohan Ravichandra (SAR, 2022; Toprak, 2022).

Academics and students have continued to hold regular, peaceful protests on and off campus since then. In 2023, the Boğaziçi University rectorate launched disciplinary investigations against

**Table 2.** Top five countries with the largest 10-year decline in freedom in the world.

	2024 (%)	Category
Nicaragua	–38	Not free
Nagorno-Karabagh	–34	Not free
Libya	–32	Not free
Tanzania	–28	Partly free
Türkiye	–27	Not free

Data source: Freedom House: Freedom in the World (2024: 3).

ten faculty members for their participation in the peaceful demonstrations. The rector's office also threatened judicial, criminal, and administrative proceedings if the faculty members continued to do so. In March 2025, student protests increased against the arrest of Ekrem İmamoğlu, who was CHP's presidential candidate for the next election in 2028, on factually baseless charges of corruption and aiding a terrorist organization. The protests became nationwide, reaching from Boğaziçi University in Istanbul to METU in Ankara. In April 2025, over 2,000 individuals were arrested. Among them were 189 people, primarily university students, facing a variety of charges. These charges include: attending unauthorized demonstrations; failing to disperse upon police orders; carrying weapons or concealing their faces to hide their identity; and incitement to commit a crime (SAR, 2025).

The increasing evidence of the erosion of university autonomy and the use of coercion against academics and students indicates the gradual erosion of academic freedom. This process has led to a culture of fear, which has also contributed to apprehension and 'self-censorship' as identified by the UN (UNGA, 2022). Since the Presidential Communication Centre (*Cumhurbaşkanlığı İletişim Merkezi – CIMER*) was established in 2015, academics have lost trust in their students and colleagues because any user can submit anonymous complaints about an individual's breach of national security and/or insult to the President's personality. The culture of fear is also disseminated by pro-government newspapers or government-sponsored trolls on social media. Pro-government media outlets published the identities of dissident scholars who signed the AfP, researched the Armenian genocide and Kurdish issue, or criticized government policies and the President's decisions. For example, in 2021, the CoHE proposed to set up a research institute named 'The International Institute of Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity' to investigate not only the "allegations" of genocide against Armenians as "baseless", 'but also to do research on crimes against humanity that are taking place all around the world, from America to Asia' (CoHE cited in Matthews, 2021). It appears the institute has never been established. In another example, in 2023, the head of the Urban and Regional Planning Department, Professor Funda Yirmibeşoğlu, was dismissed from duty by the management of Istanbul Technical University after her department's academics released a declaration on social media in criticism of a Presidential decree opening the earthquake zone to rapid construction in Southern Turkey near the Syrian border (duvaR, 2023a).

While neither the CoHE nor the AKP governments have published a clear list of politically and socially sensitive topics, the intensification of a culture of fear has led academics to mostly self-censor their research and teaching on controversial issues. Specifically, the 1991 Anti-Terror Law, which was amended in 2006, and Article 7(b) was used against the signatories of AfP to charge them for making propaganda or being a 'supporter' of a 'terrorist organization' (Human Rights Association [HRA], 2008). In a Report on Academic Freedom during the State of Emergency, the School of Human Rights (*İnsan Hakları Okulu*) documented various types of self-censorship. On university campuses, 'Academics stated that they are avoiding politically sensitive topics during classes, not inviting guest lecturers or experts to their courses, and using international instead of

local examples. They also postpone or cancel their courses and change exam questions to minimize the risks of experiencing repercussions' (Hünler, 2023: 159). In mainstream media, dissident voices are also censored because mostly pro-government academics are invited to contribute to debates, and many of them have regular columns in pro-government newspapers.

Self-censorship is also widespread on free digital platforms, including social media, blogs, vlogs, digital alternative newspapers, and television channels broadcasting from abroad. Instead of directly censoring social, political sciences and critical humanities studies, the CoHE has prioritized specific research areas in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics subjects with better funding opportunities. The CoHE has become the central decision-making and implementing authority without consulting universities about their research priorities. 'On its website, the CoHE announced that with the "Specialisation in Higher Education and Mission Differentiation Project" implemented in 15 universities, universities will work with local actors to specialize in activities such as health, agriculture and geothermal studies, animal husbandry, basin-based development, textiles, ceramics, forestry, and nature tourism' (*Bilim Akademisi*, 216-217 in Hünler, 2023: 158). The longer the AKP regime remains in power, the more the culture of fear deepens, with further unprecedented consequences for Turkish society and democracy, such as brain drain. According to the Turkish Informatics Foundation's (*Türkiye Bilişim Vakfı*) report, the brain drain of critical scholars and researchers has increased since 2015 (duvaR, 2023b).

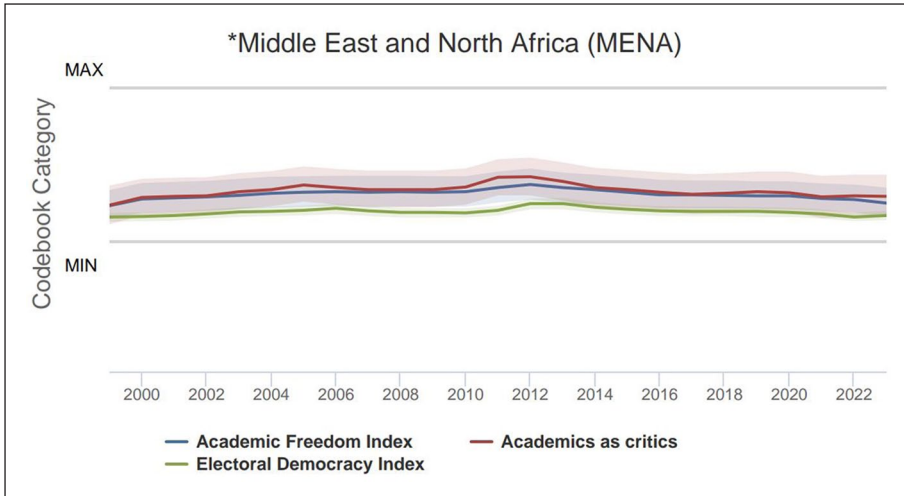
The deepening erosion of academic freedom and increasing culture of fear not only indicate the failure of the AKP's '2023 Vision' in higher education but also reflect the consolidation of illiberal democracy. The 'new' Türkiye is no longer on the path towards EU membership, but in line with regional trends of democratic and academic backsliding in the Middle East and North Africa, where 'academics as critics' are at a low level (see Figure 3).

Historical evidence from the past century reveals that academics who participated in peaceful democratic and reform movements were often silenced and jailed by oppressive governments in various regions, including Europe, Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, and South America. While the Middle East is not unique in this sense, authoritarian regimes tend to use the most repressive tactics to silence critical academics and dissident intellectuals and 'persecute individual scholars' (Norris, 2024: 17). Consequently, the increase of self-censorship to avoid severe punishments and other negative consequences prevents academics from expressing critical views in the pursuit of truth, and from speaking truth to the power, or forces them to leave their countries. Increasing self-censorship is an alarming trend for the future of generations and the advancement of democratic societies. According to Huntington's theory, Türkiye was one of the third wave countries where conditions for democratic transition were most favourable, alongside Czechoslovakia (currently the Czech Republic and Slovakia), Hungary, and Poland in Eastern Europe at the end of the Cold War. While these countries all achieved EU membership, Erdoğan's Türkiye drifted away from this path. According to Huntington, 'Turkish democracy probably needed the [EU] anchor,' as experienced in Spain, Portugal, and Greece in the 1970s and then Eastern European countries in the 2000s. However, the EU's failure to provide that anchor, combined with the AKP leadership's agenda of a silent regime change, has made the future of Turkish 'democracy more uncertain,' as the world is witnessing now (Huntington, 1993: 282).

## Concluding remarks

This article's theoretical findings suggest that the erosion of academic freedom is not merely a consequence of democratic backsliding but rather part of an active mechanism through which illiberal regimes consolidate their political power. Theoretically, the Turkish context exhibits how the electoral façade has enabled the AKP regime to maintain democratic appearances while

**Figure 3.** Academic freedom index, Electoral Democracy Index and academics as critics in the Middle East and North Africa between 2000–2022.



Data Source: Highcharts.com / V-Dem Data Version 14.

simultaneously eroding intellectual autonomy and weakening higher education institutions. This process has led to increased self-censorship in universities and beyond, as fear tactics are employed to suppress dissent. Historically, Türkiye's engagement with academic freedom and electoral democracy, like the Turkish march, was one step forward and two steps backwards due to the military coups in 1960, 1973 and 1981. While the regular occurrence of military coups demonstrated the lack of full-scale democratization, this historical pattern also proved that academic freedom was already a lost cause when the AKP came to power in 2002. Despite the AKP regime's successful economic liberalization and its promises of democratization and educational reform as part of its commitment to a neoliberal order during its first decade in power, the systemic attacks on academic freedom indicated deepening democratic backsliding. During the AKP's second decade in power, the 'new' Türkiye took an illiberal turn following the Gezi Park resistance in 2013, the Afp petition and the failed coup of 2016.

Understanding the progression of consolidating illiberalism in Türkiye in a sequential manner is important because what is experienced under the AKP regime reveals how the erosion of academic freedom is symbiotically entangled with democratic backsliding. The lived experience of Turkish academics, students, and critical researchers in a culture of fear, marked by the unprecedented consequences of apprehension and self-censorship, as well as brain drain, highlights the importance of challenging government policies within the context of global solidarity. There is already an alarming global trend of democratic backsliding and erosion of academic freedom. The CEU's forced move out of Orban's Hungary, the continuing attacks on academic freedom in President Donald Trump's America and the gradual decline of academic freedom over the past decade in the United Kingdom, where AFI score dropped from 'fully free' (0.84) in 2022 to 'mostly free' in 2023, prove the urgency of this threat (SAR, 2024). Deepening attacks on academic freedom will haunt the future of democratic societies and higher education for generations. Any hope for reversing it depends not only on the will of future leaders but also on the strength of global solidarity for the subsequent decades of the twenty-first century.



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## Notes

1. *Perspectives on Democratisation in Turkey* was published by the Turkish Businessmen and Employers’ Association (TUSIAD). Professor Bülent Tanör died in 2002.
2. The role of the Directorate of Religious Affairs as another influential institution in the subtle process of Islamization was criticized by the United Nations Special Report that ‘*religious practice appears to be regimented by the government and Islam is treated as if it were a “State affair”*’ (HRW, 2004: 32).
3. Fethullah Gülen was the head of Turkish Islamic clergy who lived in exile in the United States from 1999 until his death in 2024. Gülen was regarded as the number one enemy of the Turkish state and the mastermind behind the failed coup of 2016.

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