



Leader of Turkey's New Science Academy Speaks Out

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ISTANBUL—The rift is deepening between Turkey's academics and the conservative government led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. University students and faculty members have played a large role in the national protests movement that began as an environmental sit-in on 28 May. The government has mounted an aggressive legal campaign against academics who have criticized its policies, arresting several prominent scientists, including a physicist who [attempted suicide](#) in jail on 14 June.

The relationship between Turkish academics and their government began to sour long before the current unrest. Some 120 members of the Turkish Academy of Sciences—all but 30—have resigned since the government [seized control](#) of the academy in late 2011 and began appointing party cadres as members. Turkish scientists have now founded an independent academy in opposition, called [Bilim Akademisi](#)—or simply, in English, The Science Academy. One of the founders of the new academy, Sabancı University astrophysicist Mehmet Ali Alpar, spoke with *ScienceInsider*. The interview has been edited for brevity.

Q: What is the new academy doing?

M.A.: We have been publishing declarations about academic freedom and honesty. And we have sent letters to international academies. We are in the process of being recognized internationally.

Q: How is life amid the protests?

M.A.: We have been shocked by the events. [Faculty members at] many different universities issued declarations and collected signatures against the police brutality. There is also an international protest collecting signatures on the Web. The academy is preparing a report about the current [political] developments from a social science point of view. There was a demonstration of university faculty on Taksim Square [in Istanbul]. I wasn't there myself.

Q: Why did you not take part in protests?

M.A.: I have stayed independent of the protest, though many of my students and other members of my university have attended. One reason is that if there was confrontation, I worry that I might be seen to represent the academy. I feel that no institution should be directly involved. Our focus is on academic freedom. Our members are involved. But I want to remain independent. We are being very careful. Things here are often manipulated for politics. If something happened, it would be portrayed by the government as evidence of some kind of conspiracy. ... Perhaps I'm overcautious.

Q: Most Turkish academics have requested anonymity for fear of reprisal. Why is there so much fear?

M.A.: People feel intimidated. For example, even in 2006 the government started antagonizing scientists. It was ridiculous. They took three former presidents of TÜBİTAK [the government's science funding agency] and all former members of the science board, including me, to court. It was on the grounds that we had made overpayments to scientists working on leave from universities and working at TÜBİTAK. It was just to harass us. The court case fell apart in the end. It has really gone overboard since then, jailing people, holding them under arrest. This is a general travesty of justice.

Q: What has been the impact of the protests on academia and research?

M.A.: The problem is that all this is keeping our minds off our science. It's difficult to concentrate and also for our students. But I am more concerned by the impact of the government's science policies in general than the protest crisis specifically. Before the protests even began, there was long-term danger for fundamental science here. The science policy at TÜBİTAK under the current administration has very little appreciation for anything but applied technologies. They see fundamental sciences as a luxury. Although the overall budget for TÜBİTAK has expanded, the proportion for basic science has shrunk.

Q: What are you working on these days?

M.A.: I'm following events and working on the new science academy. We now have 120 members from all areas of science. And we have started a scholarship for postdocs and young faculty. We got 350 applications from across Turkey for 20 scholarships. Other than that, I'm continuing my research on pulsars and magnetars, working with my students. The protests are disrupting this, but this summer I hope to set aside at least some of my time for research.

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