

Secular scholars fight government control in Turkey

16 July 2013 **Michele Catanzaro**

Secular members of academia in Turkey are banding together to strike back at what they portray as attempts by the government to put scientific institutions under the control of religious scholars. But they say their actions are being stifled by a new 'climate of fear'.

'The government is trying to take control of everything by putting its people everywhere'

Growing dissatisfaction with the Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's treatment of science surfaced on 6 June when about 2000 scholars marched across Istanbul to Taksim Square. There they joined people protesting against the destruction of Gezi Park, and more broadly against the government.

Later that month the Turkish scientific community was shocked to learn that prominent chemical engineer Kemal Gürüz had attempted suicide in jail. Gürüz, 65 years old and a former president of the Turkish Council of Higher Education and the country's main research council, TÜBİTAK, has been in prison since June 2012.

Outspoken secularity

Last month he was indicted in connection with an alleged coup attempt. However, his supporters say that the charges are punishment for his outspoken secularity. 'On June 14 more than 30 of the people with the same accusation were set free, waiting for the trial, but he was not: he was very depressed, and tried to cut his wrists with a broken glass out of desperation,' explains his wife, **Güniz Gürüz**, a retired professor of chemical engineering at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara.

The fracture between secular and religious scholars in Turkish academia opened in 2011, **when nearly half of the members of the Turkish science academy TÜBA resigned** in protest at government interference. In December 2011, some of these academics founded the new **Bilim Akademisi**.

The split came after Erdoğan announced in August 2011 **that new members of the academy would be appointed by governmental bodies, instead of academy members**. 'Prominent scientists are a slim minority among newly elected members [of TÜBA]: this is tragic,' says **Ersin Yurtsever**, a theoretical chemist and professor at Koç University in Istanbul, who is one of the founders of Bilim Akademisi. 'The new academy is not opposing anything: it just wants to be independent.'

'The government is trying to take control of everything by putting its people everywhere,' says **Mahir Arikol**, a chemical engineer and emeritus professor at Bosphorus University. Public university rectors in Turkey are appointed by the country's president following a vote among professors. However, in 2012 at Gezi University in Ankara the candidate who came fifth ended up being appointed, says Yurtsever. Although the move is legal, some scientists suspect political bias.

Both TÜBA and TÜBİTAK were given the opportunity to comment but chose not to.

A new academy

Bilim Akademisi has 120 members, Yurtsever says, and has set up graduate summer schools, conferences for the general public, and a programme to support young scientists. It is funded by member fees and donations, and by overheads on its activities.

'We will send delegations to Turkey in autumn to speak with both TÜBA and Bilim,' says Matthias Johannsen, executive secretary of **All European Academies (ALLEA)**, an organisation of which TÜBA is a longstanding member, and to which Bilim Akademisi has applied to join. In October last year ALLEA sent a **letter to the president of Turkey** expressing concerns over TÜBA's independence. 'We are inspecting the statutes of both organisations: our general assembly will decide in April 2014,' says Johannsen.

'Prominent scientists don't want to join the new academy for fear of being punished with not getting funded,' says Yurtsever. 'A few cases of arbitrary investigations and marginalisation of outspoken professors in universities have triggered widespread fear and self-censorship,' he says.

'Chemistry, as a basic science, does not feel much political pressure, but social scientists must be feeling a lot,' says Yurtsever. This year, Turkey's main research council refused to fund a workshop on quantitative evolutionary biology, arguing that 'evolution is a controversial issue'. In January, books on evolution disappeared from the list of popular science reading of the agency.

Yurtsever and Arikol both think the government is succeeding in scaring scientists, but not in convincing them. 'People are speaking up more and more, but only when they are in a group, not individually,' Yurtsever says.