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One year has passed since 1,128 academics raised their voices for an end to the violence against the Kurdish population in Turkey, demanding an international, independent investigation of the occurrences during the 24-hour curfews declared in Kurdish towns and districts from August 2015 onward. The now well-known ‘peace petition’ had been a reaction to the violence, an outcry against the unbearable way in which the military had taken over towns and districts in the predominantly Kurdish south-eastern provinces of the Turkish state. Children and elderly people had been assassinated on the streets and in their homes, bodies left on the streets, the injured denied medical treatment. Despite the decisive and clear wording accusing the state of committing a massacre and refusing to be party to this crime, the petition was nevertheless a modest form of protest, because all other forms of democratic contestation had already been radically impeded since a suicide bomb attack on a previous attempt to demand peace with a large demonstration on October 10, 2015 in Ankara. A hundred demonstrators from various political factions were killed, hundreds injured and scarred.

Government’s reaction

However, even this comparably simple form of critique was not tolerated by the government. The reaction was a concerted mass smear campaign triggered by the words of the President Recep Tayyip Erdogan leading to arrests, police investigations and ongoing dismissals of scholars. Denouncing the signatories as traitors, as ‘pseudo academics’ who were enemies of the nation, the pro-government media took up Erdogan’s discourse, picturing the signatories individually on their web and print outlets, making them perfect targets for goaded Erdogan-supporters. The homes of a number of signatories were raided in the early morning hours; some were taken into custody on campus and the wave of dismissals commenced, starting with those in the most precarious working conditions.

This harsh reaction, however, prompted a wave of solidarity both in Turkey and beyond. Defying the threat of persecution, over another thousand scholars added their names to the petition. Academic and non-academic associations from all over the world expressed their critique of the state’s course of action in open letters to the Turkish government and solidarity messages. However, continuing its politics of spreading fear, the state had four

signatories exemplarily arrested on charges of terrorism propaganda. Professors Esra Mungan, Muzaffer Kaya, Kivanc Ersoy and Meral Camci remained detained for over a month, enduring solitary confinement and strip searches. (Meral Camci was in fact in France at the time of the detainment of the other three, but decided to return knowing she could also be imprisoned upon arrival. She was released with the others after the first court hearing, after 23 days in prison.)

Today, one year on, the trial is still ongoing. Police investigations have been commenced against all signatories, including those abroad. Nearly 500 signatories have faced disciplinary investigations within their institutions. The number of those dismissed is increasing every month, currently at 182. Others have been forced to resign or retire, have lost administrative positions, are sidelined and excluded from standard academic procedures such as participating in thesis committees, are disinvited from conferences and refused funding for research projects and conference attendance. Dozens have had to leave the country, while others cannot leave the country due to travel bans and the cancellation of their passports. The most worrying fact, however, is that this repression towards the academics is unfortunately part and parcel of the state's authoritarian regime to silence all critical voices left.

In the months following the petition, the state further accelerated its war-strategy against the Kurdish population, a strategy which has radically turned its back on the previous more liberal discourses of the government emphasising the brotherhood between Kurds and Turks, and the initial peace talks between state officials and the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party which had lasted until February 2015. The violence reached its preliminary climax when military special forces killed around 170 people who had sought shelter in the two or three basements in Cizre, a small border-town to Syria. For days, critical media had published video messages and telephone calls in which those trapped were calling for help. However, the military officials permitted neither ambulances to access the area nor the wounded to leave, finally burning the building to the ground. The shocking brutality of the state exceeded all expectations. Following this, hardly any people remained in those towns and districts under curfew. Over a million people were forced to leave their homes only to return to a heap of rubble. Whole districts have been razed to the ground; bulldozers carrying away the remains even before the owners were allowed to return, including all personal belongings. Having left for what they thought would be a week, these people now have

nothing to return to.

A concerted effort against the Kurdish movement

This comprehensive strategy is definitely not a limited operation against an armed group. Instead, it aims at destroying the successful politics of the Kurdish movement and the trust and support the population has in it. Since the mid-2000s, the Kurdish movement had particularly focused on empowering civil society with help of the municipalities in the region which are run by the Kurdish party and formed a 'coalition' party HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party) with other left and marginalised ethnic, faith and LGBT groups. This politics had been very successful receiving strong support for the municipalities and gaining a landslide 13.2% in the national elections of June 2015, which left the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) without a majority. Re-elections were held five months later and the AKP made a decisive shift to the right, becoming increasingly authoritarian by the minute.

The aftermath of the attempted coup six months ago has been a welcome excuse not only to rid the state institutions of anyone in contact with the Gülen Community, held responsible for the attempted coup, but also to imprison mayors of the Kurdish municipalities, council members and municipality employees, as well as currently 12 MPs of the Kurdish-leftwing party HDP. Since the declaration of emergency rule, the elected mayors of over 50 towns and districts have been ousted out of power and replaced by state-assigned 'trustees', as they are euphemistically called. The media has been severely intimidated, with around 200 journalists currently in prison and over 177 different newspapers, magazines and TV channels shut down. Self-censorship is at its peak. The parliament has been practically by-passed through emergency decrees, most of them listing pages and pages of individual names of those to be dismissed. Overall, more than 80,000 state employees have been sacked so far, among them military and police personnel, but the highest number interestingly in the field of education.

A constant pledge to national unity, loyalty and militarism is the dominant discourse today, turning all critical voices into traitors and internal and external threats to the nation. The legal system has become a farce; the number of prisons is being increased; torture and deprivation of imprisoned back on the agenda. And as I am writing these lines, the parliament is voting on the end of parliamentary democracy, the concentration of power in the hands of

the president alone, lacking the simplest mechanisms of checks and balances; MPs demonstrating their loyalty to the president by overtly waving their voting tokens for everyone to see and the prime minister celebrates the proposed abolishment of his post as an act of heroism adding the words “relax and obey”.

Looking back at this past year in Turkey, we see an increasingly overt development towards a more and more authoritarian society and government. Rudimentarily masked by arguments of counter-terrorism, society has been put into a straitjacket. Critique in any form has become increasingly impossible to voice, let alone make it heard. The few acts of protest remain limited, often with only few participants or even individual. With a mixture of disbelief and fear, people hope for this to be a phase, which is soon to end. However, according to law expert and honorary president of the Turkish Supreme Court Sami Selcuk, if the amendment of the constitution is accepted in the proposed form, the president to come “can become nothing other a dictator”.

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