Dr. ULRIKE FLADER

One month since the éclat about the ‘peace petition’ in Turkey, the overwhelming majority of both state and private universities have started internal inquiries against the signatories; 17 academics have been fired so far, four signatories were forced to resign, while part-time lecturers and foreigners were rejected the renewal of their contracts or had their courses cancelled; and project funds and PhD-scholarships have been withdrawn.

On the 10th January, an initial number of 1128 academics from 89 different universities, including a small number of international well-known intellectuals, such as Noam Chomsky, Judith Butler and David Harvey, had released a petition under the title ‘We will not be party to this crime’ criticizing the ongoing curfews, killings and forced migration currently taking place in the Kurdish region in the South-East of Turkey. What followed was the sudden outbreak of a massive smear campaign which triggered over another 1000 colleagues to add their name to the petition in solidarity.

This smear campaign was ignited by the reaction of Turkey’s President Erdoğan who promptly declared the signatories as traitors of the Republic. Literally equating signing the petition with the armed struggle against the state, he argued their action was secessionist and a violation of the unity of the nation, and therefore in other words: terrorist propaganda. This declaration was the start signal for an infuriated witch-hunt on the signatories in which all sorts of institutions and individuals were more than eager to participate. First, the commission for higher education (YÖK) – interestingly, a relic from the last military coup 1980 used precisely to control and monitor academic freedom and for this reason formerly criticized by the currently governing party AKP[1] itself – immediately took up its traditional role and announced that all measures will be undertaken against the signatories. However, even before YÖK had even clarified the legal grounds on which it could start official investigations, private universities and some state universities had either hastily dismissed the signatories among their staff, commenced internal inquiries or issued press statements asking the signatories to resign. At the same time, state prosecutors as well as individuals all over the country have filed cases against these academics, generally referring to the Anti-Terrorism Law. Even worse than all this, pro-government media and ultra-nationalist groups – organized in- and outside universities – had begun to single out individual signatories

picturing their photographs in local media and on the internet denouncing them as members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and threatening them personally, so that they have had to leave the towns they were living and teaching in fear for their lives.

This shocking wave of anticipatory obedience highlights the degree which authoritarianism in Turkey has reached over the last few months. The refreshed war against the Kurds plays an important role in this. It has brought the right-wing and the AKP closer together and has renewed aggravated nationalism and racism, and has made it more and more impossible to voice critique. What we have been witnessing is the "Gleichschaltung" of the whole Turkish society[2]. While the AKP has over time managed to bring the judiciary, police force and wide parts of the administration and the media inline ideologically, all forms of legally expressing opposition in public through demonstrations, press releases etc. have effectively been made impossible through the series of bombings killing over 140 people in Diyarbakir, Suruç and finally Ankara, which the government claims were carried out by ISIS, but in fact targeted the critical public in their attempts to make use of their democratic freedoms of assembly and speech[3]. It was precisely the deep frustration with the obstruction of all major forms of critique which prompted the academics to publish this petition. Nevertheless, the question what effect a simple petition could have in this context of obvious repression and increasingly authoritarian rule was on the minds of many who signed. Many signed without much hope of achieving any reaction.

Disqualified Truths

The fierce attack on the academics, however, triggered an unprecedented wave of national and international support within the academia as well as from a whole range of social and vocational groups and civil society organizations, which provoked a heightened public discussion on the freedom of speech and the possibility of questioning the state or Erdoğan in person[4]. In this sense, this minor attempt to break through the wall of silence managed to – at least temporarily – loosen the grip of authoritarianism. It managed to challenge the state's regime of truth on the so-called "operations against terror" in the Kurdish region. "With this petition", as one of the signatories argues, "the government was caught red-handed committing these atrocities against the Kurds, just like it happened with its trucks going to ISIS and the embezzlement scandal, before". In order to justify its new war strategy against the Kurds, the government has substantially managed to construct its own truth about these

operations. While all mainstream media were following this party-line, arguing that the deaths and the forced migration taking place in the districts put under curfew by the government were caused by the PKK, the petition openly accused the government. That is the reason why the petition provoked so much. The signatories pointed towards the "unsayable", the disqualified truth. Through their position as academics they re-established legitimacy for the truths of the people in Cizre, Silopi, Nusaybin and elsewhere in the Kurdish region, which have already been disqualified by identifying them with terrorism.

Hence, what irritated Erdoğan in this case was not the *number* of signatories, which – as some scholars have highlighted – the effect of petitions usually depends on[5]. Although the first round of over one thousand signatories was quite substantial considering that only academics signed, it was still very much limited compared to the 10,000 women who signed a similar petition only a few weeks later and achieved little to no attention[6]. In fact, as many signatories of the second round later remarked, the petition had not been circulated particularly well. Only very few even of the signatories knew that before this petition, the 'academics for peace' had been a loose group of around 100 academics based in different cities in Turkey connected by a mailing list. It had been founded two years earlier in order to support calls for peace talks between the Turkish government and PKK-leader Abdullah Öcalan, which in fact commenced soon after. Little to no activity occurred over the past years, and the rare meetings were only frequented by very few. Hence, what triggered Erdoğan's anger was rather the fact that *academics* had issued this petition; people 'paid by the state', as he emphasized, however voicing heretical ideas. Trying to ridicule the signatories as "so-called wise" and "half-portion intellectuals"[7], Erdoğan accused them of being them "dark" (karanlık) rather than "enlightened" (aydın), which academics are often referred to in Turkish language. It is the anger over the fact that there continues to be a potential voice of critique from with the state apparatus, despite the attempt to 'harmonize' the university by benefitting pro-AKP candidates over the recent years. Therefore, it is very likely that the government will seize this opportunity to further dismantle the remnants of critical academia and rid it of these '*dark' voices*.

The Search for the Author behind the Script and Criminalizing the Unwritten

Besides the aim to obstruct such critical voices, the reason why AKP representatives are putting so much effort in constructing this petition as terrorism offence is to criminalize

certain discourses. In this haste to identify the petition with an act of terrorism, the first interrogations of some of the scholars reveal a frantic search for the single author, the mastermind behind the plot, for which the authorities can then 'prove' a connection to the Kurdish Movement, or even better directly to the PKK itself. Some commentators even argued that the petition had been written in the Kandil Mountains, the base of the PKK in Northern Iraq, while others tried to prove the similarity in style of writing. The main reason why it is maintained is because the text violates one central rule of state discourse: it refuses to comply with compulsory call on the PKK to put down its weapons. Omitting such a call and only focusing on the violence of the state is a breach of the accepted state discourse. Like a mantra, the AKP representatives repetitively accuse especially the legal left-wing/Kurdish party HDP[8] of not calling enough on the PKK to end their share of the violence. For this reason, the state discourse results in a trap for anyone really advocating peace: By criticizing the violence of the PKK itself one unwittingly endorses the state discourse and, therefore, makes state violence unspeakable. Maybe for the first time had such a diverse group agreed on omitting such a call in its declaration. This attempt to escape the state's compulsory discourse was the strength of the petition, but simultaneously its greatest dilemma. While the AKP is trying to construct a criminal offence precisely out of this unsaid, it also haunts the group as a potential aspect of divide. As Turkey is on the brink of marching into Syria in order to preserve its power vis-à-vis the Kurds, it remains to see whether the group can handle this dilemma in a way that maneuvers out of the binary logic of the state and whether the various vocational groups which were inspired by the 'academics for peace' and their petition can further develop into a broader peace movement.

Notes

[1] Justice and Development Party (Turkish: Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi)

[2] This point has also been expressed by Murat Özbank in an interview by Şerif Karataş, ‚Barış için imza atan Murat Özbank: Korkup sustukça, korktuğumuz başımıza gelir', *evrensel*, 7.02.2016, http://www.evrensel.net/haber/271929/baris-icin-imza-atan-murat-ozbank-korkup-sustukca-korktugumuz-basimiza-gelir, retrieved 10.02.2016.

[3] On the 5th June 2015, two days before the general elections a bomb attack killed five people and injured over 400 people at the crowded final election event of the left-

wing/Kurdish party HDP in Diyarbakir. Only one month later, another bomb killed 34 Socialists who were on their way to Kobanê on a solidarity action, while they stood gathered for their press release. This was followed by the largest of these attacks, the suicide attack on a peace demonstration in Ankara on the 10th October 2015 leaving 107 people dead and over 500 injured. Since this massacre, larger gatherings are rather held indoors to reduce the danger of another attack, and body and bag searches with and without security technology are arranged by the organizers themselves.

[4] The group received solidarity messages from Japan to Greece to Canada and triggered a large number of open letters to the President (see http://Internationalsolidarity4academic.tumblr.com/ and http://barisicinakademisyenler.net), but it also inspired the formation of a number of different vocational groups "for peace", among them not just "journalists for peace", but also health workers, financial advisers, the retired, trade unionists, tourist guides, musicians, and shopping mall workers just to name a few. Besides this, a solidarity group with connections to universities and research centres abroad is being set up to enable those academics at risk to go abroad as visiting scholars or with other forms of funding.

[5] For example: della Porta, Donnatella & Diani, Mario. 2006. *Social Movements. An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, p. 172.

[6] See the website of the initiative: www.yasamdanyanayiz.com

[7] Cited in Bianet, 'President Erdoğan: Lumpen, Half-Portion Intellectual', 20.01.2016, http://m.bianet.org/english/politics/171334-president-edogan-lumpen-half-potion-intellectual, accessed 21.01.2016.

[8] Peoples' Democratic Party (Turkish: Halkların Demokratik Partisi)

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