Policing Student Protests in Turkey: From the Promise of ‘Citizen in Uniform’ to Dictating ‘l'état c'est moi’

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Abstract
To fulfill the requirements of European Union membership, Turkey promised to improve policing policies and practices in the first decade of the twenty-first century. It was hoped that the police would embrace the concept of being “citizens in uniform,” serving the whole community and not merely the privileged few or state interests. However, in early 2021, during the student protest against the controversial appointment of a staunch supporter of the ruling party as the rector of Bogazici University, police adopted a heavy-handed approach responding to the protests, including a widespread abuse of power. Using the “cyber-ethnographic” method and analysis of primary and secondary sources, including the author’s 28 years of professional lived experience at the Turkish Police Academy, this essay claims that there has been a move to an authoritarian stage in the politics of the police. The study explores why students are labeled as deviants and terrorists and encounter other forms of discrimination and exclusion. The essay argues that the promise of the police as ‘citizens in uniform’ has been ignored and the police have been reverting to ‘l'état c'est moi.’ The responses of the authorities to the student protests have been brutal: categorizing, marginalizing, blaming, criminalizing, and demonizing the students based on their ideological, ethnic, religious, and sexual identities. The article concludes that assaults on academic freedom, on the right of peaceful assembly and LGBTQ rights aim at homogenizing and controlling all areas of Turkey.

Keywords Turkey · Boğaziçi University · Student protests · Police violence · AKP

Introduction
Democratic developments in social institutions and the politics of the police follow parallel patterns in Turkey: as democracy improves, so does the practice of the police. When the Justice and Development Party (AKP) became the governing party in 2002, there was a deep legitimacy crisis in the state (Hulagu, 2021, p. 4). As a candidate country for the European Union (EU) since 2005, the AKP has always claimed that Turkey is dependent on the EU accession process. Turkey has had to reform its legal and political systems based on the EU’s democratic criteria (Babul, 2012; Piran, 2013). Human rights records remained a key indicator of its governmental legitimacy (Babul, 2017). Therefore, the AKP gave promises to the internal and external community of Turkey to improve its human rights records.

Aiming to maintain consultation mechanisms, policing by consent, independence, and accountability between the police and the community, the early 2000s witnessed a set of promises and reforms related to improving policing policies and practices. The reasons for this move toward this unprecedented democratic direction are twofold. Internally, there were growing public and political demands that the police should act within the rule of law and be accountable to not only the law, but also to the public. Externally, there was a growing concern over human rights records, as well as increasing pressure from international human rights organizations and other independent bodies. The EU set out fundamental principles and rules and required Turkey to develop and implement its “law and order” policies conforming to EU standards. Turkey agreed to implement the Copenhagen Criterion and the European Human Rights Chart prior to the 2000s, but to fulfill its obligation to be a member of the EU, substantial structural and procedural reforms were carried out in social, economic, and political areas. The constitution was changed and new laws were introduced. During the 2000s, substantial twinning projects, which are
the European Union instrument for institutional cooperation between Public Administrations of the EU Member States and beneficiary or partner countries, were carried out. Some others are still in progress, between private and public institutions of Turkey and the EU countries. It was claimed that the EU process would lead the country to become a land of democracy, equality, and freedom, therefore improving its human rights records and respect for the rule of law (The EU, 2021; The European Community, 2021; Trans European Policy Study Association, 2021).

In the police institution, the idea that “the police are citizens in uniform” was introduced in police education, training materials, in-service training, in other areas of police socialization processes, and in private and public discourses, including the media. With the existence of a strong police subculture, there were some criticisms, doubts, reservations, and resistance to change, especially among high-ranking police chiefs as well as at the grass-root level of police officers. Most were happy with their present status, roles, and practices within their police organization and tended to ignore the new democratic ideas and developments. Their most common opinions and reactions were: “Leave aside what you’ve learned in police school. Street policing practices are different from theoretical policing. If you try to implement what you’ve learned in police school, you won’t be able to do real policing in the streets. Sometimes, the laws prevent the police from doing their job efficiently and effectively. You don’t have to follow the law all the time.” It could be argued that to some extent, the strong political determination of the government overcame these resistances to change. The philosophy of the policing policy was changed, from being “the force” to “the service”; working for the good of the public. However, some police officers continued to hold onto the idea that they were the owners and representatives of the state, reflecting the misconception that was deep-rooted in the political developments and strong police subculture in Turkey.

Since its establishment and its history of fragmented democracy, Turkey has never experienced “a golden age of policing.” Now, democracy in Turkey is in another deep crisis, as is the politics of the police. Serious allegations of excessive police force used by police officers and other violations make up a long list of abuse of fundamental human rights and freedoms (HRW, 2021a). Marginalized voices are silenced systematically, dissident TV channels are shut down, journalists are jailed, and digital content is censored. The European Court of Human Rights’ decisions are ignored. Freedom of expression and peaceful assembly are restricted. Demands for equality from women and students are met with police violence, followed by stigmatization and criminalization in news discourse. The rhetoric of “counterterrorism” is abused to justify repression and allow the perpetration of some of the worst atrocities in an almost singular strategy to cling to power. Criticisms against the government are considered assaults against the state. All dissidents, especially human rights defenders, opposition politicians, women, students, and journalists, are deprived of their freedom on charges of terrorism.

Given this new turmoil in the political climate and the politics of public order demonstrations, all forms of collective actions and resistance movements of the government authorities clearly show that policing is in a deep crisis. Women’s and students’ demonstrations are outlawed, the police resorts to heavy-handed tactics using tough and excessive force to deter individuals, and arbitrary detentions and arrests take place. In January and February of 2021, such a crisis manifested itself during the student protests at the Boğaziçi University (BU), a university known for its high academic standards both nationally and internationally. The BU witnessed violent policing practices and unprecedented levels of mass police violence against students. During the peaceful protests, students were stigmatized and criminalized as ‘terrorists,’ and harassed, especially students who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender (LGBT). The police conducted home raids with guns drawn, detained, and allegedly strip-searched protestors and engaged in torture. The police categorized, marginalized, blamed, and demonized the students based on their ideological, ethnic, religious, and sexual identities, demonstrating bias, discrimination, and oppression in their enforcement during these student protests. Abandoning all the improvements that were realized during the EU accession process efforts, this essay claims that there is clear evidence of a retreat from the promise of democratic politics and consensual policing, given the recent brutal responses to the BU students’ call for a democratically elected rector.

This essay critically analyses the reasons behind the backsliding in the politics of the police; from the promise of “citizen in uniform” to dictating ‘l’état c’est moi’; the French words translating to “the state, it’s me.” First, a brief introduction of the role of protest and social movements in trying to produce changes in Turkish government policies and the often negative responses of the AKP to these protests will be presented. Furthermore, this article discusses the reasons behind tough policing practices during the student demonstrations at the BU protests, which were not isolated occurrences in particular policing policies across Turkey. The study argues that Turkey has been moving from a democratic to an authoritarian regime with institutionalized police violence and preventing people from using their fundamental rights and freedoms. As witnessed at the BU protests, the study proposes that critical voices against the government have been stigmatized and criminalized not only to suppress the opposition, but also to gain some degree of legitimacy in the eyes of the AKP loyalists. Those who hold the power believe that the abuse of police authority is a necessary
accounts of national and international journalists, online new solidarity groups, and the alumni of the BU. Other Twitter ties were shared through various social media accounts. Data of the students, scenes of police violence, and other activities were shared through various social media accounts. News, photos, the resistance movement, creating opportunities for research-students and other people to interact with one another during the protests of the BU, due to the non-participant aspect of this methodology. As Murthy (2008) suggests, this provides a fuller and more comprehensive account of the events that took place. In cyberspace, the boundaries of the observed field are both virtual and free from the location in place or geography. I observed the campus, surroundings of the BU, and other places of Istanbul where the police and protesters met, as well as analyzed personal journals, media statements, the speeches of the students, alumni, politicians, and social media to build a critical ethnography. The length of the study took two months, starting from the beginning of January to the end of February 2021.

Methodology

Ethnography is about telling social stories. With the introduction of new technologies, the stories have remained vivid, but the ways they are told have changed: “as social interactions increasingly move online, new media and digital forms of ‘old media’ are additional, valuable methods in a sociologist’s toolkit” (Murthy, 2008, p. 838). An online community was developed during the BU resistance movement, enabling students and other people to interact with one another during the resistance movement, creating opportunities for researchers to carry out cyber-ethnographic research. News, photos, videos, opinions, and comments about the collective actions of the students, scenes of police violence, and other activities were shared through various social media accounts. Data on the BU resistance were collected mainly from Twitter, posted by the faculty, students, departments, resistance and solidarity groups, and the alumni of the BU. Other Twitter accounts of national and international journalists, online new sites, human rights groups, politicians, and some personal blocks were also considered to get the data. This cyber-ethnography is accompanied by my observations of the student protests of the BU, due to the non-participant aspect of this methodology. As Murthy (2008) suggests, this provides a fuller and more comprehensive account of the events that took place. In cyberspace, the boundaries of the observed field are both virtual and free from the location in place or geography. I observed the campus, surroundings of the BU, and other places of Istanbul where the police and protesters met, as well as analyzed personal journals, media statements, the speeches of the students, alumni, politicians, and social media to build a critical ethnography. The length of the study took two months, starting from the beginning of January to the end of February 2021.

Protests, Social Movements, and Responses of the Police in Turkey

Participating in collective actions in Turkey is a risky business because the criminalization of activism is a common phenomenon (Uysal, 2016). In order to maintain totalitarian power, and suppress all resistance movements, the government authorities label activists as terrorist and/or deviants and resort to the politics of escalating repression. Collective actions are generally broken by excessive police force, house raids, arbitrary detention, and arrests. When LGBT students and protesters play a key role in ongoing demonstrations, the AKP, along with its supporters, and the media use anti-LGBT rhetoric to appeal to conservative outrage and delegitimize the protests.

Turkey has been accustomed to the stigmatization of students as deviants and/or terrorists by the authorities. The negative label is affixed to anyone who dares to criticize the authorities. This labeling policy aims to polarize society by making the distinction between “us and them” and to create both political and social pressure on those who oppose the authorities. The AKP government’s notorious statement “if we do not exist, you will not exist” has been shaping the government’s policies aimed at polarizing society, especially since the Gezi movements, and it has proved to be effective in terms of the AKP’s aims. The AKP increased public support by consolidating grassroots supporters.

Those who interrupt politics on the streets are defined as immoral and marginal (Uysal, 2017, p. 17). Political conjuncture, police subculture and habits, and the hierarchical and bureaucratic structure of the police institution determine the policing policies and practices in social movements (Dewerpe, 2006, pp. 88–89; in Uysal, 2017, p. 214). Street actions are thought to be carried out against the state. Since the police are regarded as the guardians of the state’s survival, then street protests are deemed to have been made against the
police (Uysal, 2017, p. 220). The state has complex methods for controlling collective action. The presence and intervention of the police (and the gendarmerie) in demonstrations is the most obvious and well-known form of reprisal. Putting pressure on families is also another method used by the state to control collective actions (Uysal, 2017). As Uysal (2017, p. 23) points out “when there is an intervention, we talk about police violence, if there is no intervention; we act as if there is no problem. However, even the mass presence of the security forces appears as a deterrent and a form of intimidation.” In Turkey, the streets are a very dangerous place for protesters; a place where all kinds of provocations are easily made, and protesters are marginalized and criminalized. Despite these threats, it is a very important development for students to take to the streets and make their voices heard.

In social structures where the police and political power are intertwined, the police cannot be accountable to the public. The police become an institution that is only accountable to the political power, ergo, they operate for the benefit of the political power, not for the people. This creates a field of activity that allows the violation of all fundamental rights and freedoms by the police. It is evident in Turkey, as argued by Hall et al., (2013): “Crises in policing reflect crises in democracy.” A line of argument should be established between the police, the political power, and the state. The claim that “because the police are under the command of the political power, they are also the representative of the state,” has legitimate ground in large segments of Turkish society. This causes the belief that the violations of fundamental human rights are freedoms that can be ignored for the protection of the state. As a result, criticism of the police remains limited. There may even be open support for police violence from both political power and some sections of society. This attitude is reflected in the character of the police organization, from the recruitment of police candidates to training and practices. Police officers, trainers, and supervisors from all managerial ranks cannot go beyond this determined character.

Ekşi (2019, p. 491) proposes that “policing and police masculinities have shaped and influenced one another during Turkey’s move away from the established principles of electoral democracy.” She divides public policing and associated police masculinities across three successive periods: old macho policing before the 2000s, reformed policing during the first decade of the new century, and militarized policing since 2013 (Ekşi, 2019, p. 493). “The third term, especially since the Gezi protests has been characterized by increasing authoritarianism in the government’s policies and discourse. Because the government exercises direct control of the Turkish National Police through the Ministry of the Interior, both police–citizen relationships and the policing model have been strongly affected by this shift in governmental policies and discourse” (Ekşi, 2019, p. 495). It should be stressed that before the Gezi protests the period was not too rosy. The Gezi Park protests, or as some say ‘movements’ (Farro & Demirhisar, 2014; Gürçan & Peker, 2014; Uluğ & Acar, 2019; Uysal & Akfirat, 2021), which began at the beginning of June 2013 and continued throughout that summer, started when a small group of environmentalists organized a sit-in against the destruction of a park that was supposed to make way for a new shopping mall in a central district of Istanbul. Although the protestors were met by police brutality, the sit-in later transformed into extensive public demonstrations and snowballed into countrywide protests against the government’s decision. Ultimately, the project was canceled.

Three years after the Gezi Park protests, Turkey witnessed a failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016. Since then, the country has been witnessing “a very comprehensive and violent regime transformation” (Yilmaz, 2020, p. 255), and the social construction of a new political reality has been underway to intimidate and neutralize dissenters. After the coup attempt, unwilling to share his power, President Erdoğan further increased his powers with decree laws and monopolized the authority to appoint state institutions. The politics of exclusion, alienation, discrimination, criminalization, oppression, and misogyny became widespread. Not surprisingly, for example, the student protests also evolved into a ‘zero-sum game’ between the students and President Erdoğan. It is possible to predict the result when state power comes into play instead of democratic and moral power. The President did not hesitate to use this case as a domestic policy tool to polarize society. He scapegoated students and called them terrorists. His reactions to the protestors also contradicted the need for the country to improve relations with the EU and the United States of America, although in this context he continues to give positive messages to western countries. Critics argue that “the country’s constitution and system of governance have been formally changed from a parliamentary democracy to a presidential system that grants extensive power to the autocratic President Erdoğan” (Ozeren, Cubukcu & Bastug, 2020). The power of the government is strengthened with emergency policies. Radical changes have been made in the criminal justice system, criticisms and opposition to the government have been met by violent reactions from the authorities, and pressure on the media, academia, civil society, and students has become a daily routine.

The BU Student Protests and Police Brutality: l’etat c’est moi

In the protests of the BU students, notifications and sanctions by the state were applied according to the socioeconomic status of the students’ families. The families were told that their children had been linked with terrorists and organizations originating from abroad, working against the
state. The state went even further, imposing financial sanc-
tions, especially on poor families (e.g., cancelation of health
cards, resorting to violence against family members) (Uysal,
2021). The BU student protests reflect structural relations of
inequality and oppression that characterize the established
social order in Turkey. Tough policing tactics at the BU pro-
tests once again attracted the public’s attention and raised
troubling questions regarding the limits of legitimate police
authority in Turkey. It must be kept in mind that such events
are not isolated occurrences in a particular case or related to
specific police departments. Rather, resulting from a move
toward an authoritarian regime, these are examples of a more
general problem plaguing police departments across Turkey.
Scraton (2007) argues that ‘marginalization’ and ‘criminali-
ization’ are social forces central to the application of state
power and authority regulating dissent and imposing compli-
cance. Taking Scraton’s (2007) perspectives into considera-
tion, the BU case demonstrates how structural relations of
power, authority, and legitimacy, particularly the inequalities
of class, gender, sexuality, and age, establish the determining
contexts of everyday life, social interaction, and individual
opportunity.

It is known that the state claims the monopoly of legiti-
mate coercion and the police are a symbolic representation
of the state; consequently, a visible manifestation of its
relationship with citizens (Loader & Walker, 2001). Heavy-
handed policing at the BU protests functions to demonstrate
this symbolic representation. The message of the police to
the students and citizens is clear: resistance to the appoint-
ment/decision/police/state will not work and they will not
hesitate to apply whatever is necessary. For example, penal
expansionism, criminalization, threat, detention, isolation,
deprivation, instilling fear, and other ill treatment methods
such as strip search during the detention to maintain full
control over students and citizens can and will be utilized.
In terms of the strip search, a study found that the fear, stigma,
and shame entrenched in victims’ lives through these harm-
ful state practices last for a lifetime (Stanley, 2016). The BU
student protests show as Scraton (2007: xvi) states, how the
political and ideological processes underpinning criminali-
ization are dynamic in the implementation of, and justifica-
tion for, punitive state responses.

The history of the BU, its ideologies, institutional
arrangements, and structural relations play a significant
role in understanding the nature of the recent student pro-
tests and repressive responses from the authorities. Being
the first American university founded outside the US, the
BU was established in 1863 in Istanbul, as Robert College,
on the European shore of the Bosphorus by two American
missionaries: Cyrus Hamlin and Christopher Robert (Bahar,
2019). In 1971, the name was changed to Boğaziçi (Turkish
for Bosphorus) University and the institution joined the state
university system. The BU went on to perform with superb
academic distinction contributing a great deal to national
and international academia, establishing itself as one of
Turkey’s best universities, as well as attaining a high inter-
national academic reputation. Among the graduates are key
figures who have excelled in economics, politics, bureau-
cracy, diplomacy, academia, and culture, including ministers
and former prime ministers. Being a state university did not
prevent the institution from maintaining its cultural heritage,
which has also been known for its embrace of diversity and
independent thought.

In the above-mentioned political turmoil, another recent
attempt at controlling institutions by President Erdoğan
resulted in the appointment of a professor from another
university, a former mayoral candidate from the AKP and
known for his academic plagiarism, as the rector of the BU
in January 2021. This move caused a sense of injustice and
widespread protests among both faculty members and stu-
dents at the university. The appointment violated the elec-
tion procedure which had been the university’s longstanding
tradition; the students, academics, and alumni regarded this
appointment as a heavy continuation of the attacks on aca-
demic freedom in the country (Busch & Pehlivan, 2021).
Several students and academics expressed their criticism
that the new rector’s ‘values’ were alien to the BU and they
demanded academic freedom and integrity, including a dem-
ocratic, transparent, and meritocratic procedure for academic
and administrative appointments.

Students began protesting on the campus on January
4, 2021. Due to the presence of large numbers of heavily
equipped police officers and special groups, and threaten-
ing police armored vehicles and barricades, the campus,
the entry gate of the campus, and the neighboring streets
turned into war zones. Becoming the latest action to sym-
bolize the ‘Turkish authorities’ behavior toward opposition
groups, the police closed and secured the campus gate with
handcuffs. ‘The war zone’ imagery was not only to prevent
students from entering the campus, but it was also to show
the public how operational policies and practices were being
implemented. To break up large crowds of students who had
gathered to demonstrate against the appointment of the new
rector, the response of the authorities to the protests has
been heavy-handed and recognizable. The use of excessive
force, firing tear gas and rubber bullets at students, deten-
tions and arrests were the main forms of control and sup-
pression of the BU students. Furthermore, special police
forces mounted home raids against student and family homes
and detained students in the early hours of the next day.
To intimidate the students, it was reported in the news and
on social media that accompanied the government loyal-
ist media. The academics on campus silently protested the
appointment by turning their backs to the rectorate building.
They continued their demonstrations every weekday, wear-
ing their academic gowns, with their backs turned to the
and amplified. Members of the campus LGBT club, who called for submissions related to the appointment. One self-described fan of hard rock. A student art collective blaring Metallica in front of the office of the rector, a did not disappoint, and their demonstrations included conflicting nature of the protests. In this context, the students

The BU students' demand was clear: the resignation of the rector and appointment of a new rector by means of a democratic election. It would be wise to expect the authorities and other AKP loyalists seized upon Kaaba, Islam's holiest site, setting off a storm of criticism and increase tension between the students and the police.

The authorities stigmatized protestors as terrorists, and also fed a polarizing and toxic culture war by pointing to the university's LGBTQ students as instigators of unrest and deviants who violate Turkish and Islamic values. "There is no such thing as the LGBT. This country is national, spiritual, and walking toward the future with these values," President Erdoğan said in an address to his party's members. Also, tweets by Turkey's interior minister denigrating the LGBTQ students were found by Twitter to have violated its rules about "hateful conduct" and were marked with a warning label and partially hidden from public view (HRW, 2021a). The number of detainees increased enormously in the following days. Protests were also held outside of Istanbul, mainly in Ankara, the Turkish capital and the coastal city of Izmir. The deputy interior minister announced on February 4 that 528 protesters had been detained in 38 cities in one month, adding "No one should test our state’s strength.” Human Rights Watch estimates the total number of police arrests to be around 560, most of who were released after a short time. It was claimed that the police conducted strip searches and verbally abused and threatened the detainees in some cases. Three reported that police held guns to their heads during house raids, and two said the police also slapped and insulted them (HRW, 2021b). None of the complaints made in these cases were upheld.

"Police versus students” type of protests always have the risk of ending up as conflicts between the two sides with the police eventually resorting to the use of excessive force, abuse of their power, and victimization of the students. The BU students’ demand was clear: the resignation of the rector and appointment of a new rector by means of a democratic election. It would be wise to expect the BU students to employ creative methods within the conflicting nature of the protests. In this context, the students did not disappoint, and their demonstrations included blaring Metallica in front of the office of the rector, a self-described fan of hard rock. A student art collective called for submissions related to the appointment. One of the works placed rainbow flags around an image of the Kaaba, Islam's holiest site, setting off a storm of criticism that the authorities and other AKP loyalists seized upon and amplified. Members of the campus LGBT club, who had struggled for years to regularize the club’s status at the university, were wrongly blamed for the artwork. The club’s room on campus was raided by the police. The rector announced that the club had been abolished and its “candidate” status had been invalidated. Students called the actions a “very calculated attack” aimed at criminalizing and demonizing the LGBT students (HRW, 2021a; BBC, 2021). The Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu tweeted that “4 LGBT deviants who committed the disrespect to the Kaaba-i Muazzama were detained at the Bogazici University.” The comment received an angry response from some on social media, identifying the tweet as hate speech and calling for it to be deleted. Additionally, conservative and pro-government social media users posted comments denouncing the students (BBC, 2021). Religious students expressed their refusal to discriminate on sexual identities and supported their friends who were arrested (Independent Türkçe, 2021).

The BU student protests received wide coverage not only nationally but also in the international media (ARABNEWS, 2021; Bush & Pehlivan, 2021; DW, 2021; Fahim, 2021; Gall, 2021; McKernan, 2021; Reuters, 2021). There was international support from distinguished academic institutions and people around the world, such as Noam Chomsky, Judith Butler, and many others. The following support was from Oxford University:

At Oxford, we benefit greatly from the excellent publications of our colleagues at Bogazici and work with them on many international research projects. Our students specializing in Turkish spend their year abroad at Bogazici and return with excellent academic training (Bianet, 2021a).

Outside the BU campus, supporters of the protests used one of the Gezi tactics: banging pots and pans at 9 p.m., sparking an important question: “Is this the beginning of a second Gezi?” However, BU students did not agree with the idea that their protests were a second installment of the Gezi Park movement. One student claimed that their goal is simple and clear: they just want to elect their rector (Bush & Pehlivan, 2021). The BU protests, which spread to other parts of Istanbul and outside of Istanbul, worried the authorities. Consequently, there was no delay in criminalization and threats from the authorities against the students. An Interior Ministry spokesperson said: “We do not recommend anyone to test the power of our state” (Sözcü, 2021). Another threat came from the head of Turkey’s Radio and Television Supreme Council, who said: “We closely follow the broadcasts related to provocation events. We are determined not to allow broadcasts against our state and nations” (Birgün, 2021).

It would not be wrong to say that an ‘unnamed war’ was declared on the students, and they were treated as if they
were prisoners of war by the authorities and the opportunist government-sponsored media. The students were regarded as ‘problem populations’ and they must be deterred, disciplined, and taught a lesson. For example, the President said that his government would not allow the BU protests to spiral out of control, accusing the protesters of being “terrorists” and “the LGBT youth” working against Turkey’s “national and spiritual values.” As Hintz (2018) writes:

Erdoğan’s strategy of rhetorical vilification works to delegitimize any type of opposition through naming, blaming, and framing. During the Gezi Park demonstrations of 2013, Erdoğan labeled all protesters “hooligans,” falsely blaming participants for using violence and desecrating a mosque, and framing them as part of nebulous, nefarious international lobbies seeking to undermine the Turkish state.

For Greer (2004, p. 109), “media forms and representations are instrumental in the creation of deviant identities and the subsequent stigmatization and demonization of whole groups of individuals.” In authoritarian regimes, legitimacy is not sought in the definition of the crime, the criminal, and the disproportionate use of force. The powerful build the crime and criminal identity socially on the powerless. During the protests at BU, the power side was represented by the state, the political power, the police, the judiciary, and the mass media, together with government loyalists. Receiving support from some sections of the AKP loyalists, stigmatization, and criminalization of students were primarily done by the state authorities, the AKP politicians, and the media. Thus, physical, psychological, and political violence against the protesters within the scope of the policies of state authorities to control and silence them was legitimatized in the eyes of a certain section of society.

The students from one of Turkey’s top universities with a high international academic reputation were portrayed as rebels who are lacking moral and religious values, destroying the Turkish state and national and Islamic values. For this purpose, the LGBT community has also been instrumentalized through religious and national values. Thus, students were shown as terrorists, deviants, heretics, criminals, and traitors who opposed the state. They were labeled as violators of legal, religious, and national values. Despite the students acknowledging from the beginning why they started to protest and what they wanted the authorities to do about it, authorities ignored these intentions, further claiming that most of the protesters were not students and some of the students were not from BU; however, clear support messages were also announced from other universities in Istanbul before the demonstrations were started. Other allegations by the authorities included that the students were provocateurs and the headscarved women students participating in the protests only covered their heads for political purposes at the protests, and it was claimed that these students normally did not wear headscarves during their daily lives. Headscarved women students who were targeted in the government-backed media quickly refuted these allegations on social media, sharing their university ID cards with their headscarved photos. They said that they would sue the media and the people that made such false news about them. Religious values once again were used as a weapon against students to silence them, but the students did not fall into this obvious trap and never lost their commitment to solidarity.

The United Nations Office of Human Rights Commissioner, the USA, the EU, and international organizations on human rights denounced oppression against the exercise of rights of free speech and peaceful protests, hate speech, and discrimination based on political views, religious beliefs, gender, sexual orientation, and any other social identity. They called for prompt release of students and protestors arrested for participating in peaceful demonstrations and urged the police to stop using excessive force. They condemned homophobic and transphobic comments by officials. Turkey rejected international criticism of its crackdown on protests by students opposing the appointment of a government loyalist to head Istanbul’s top university, warning countries to stay out of its domestic issues (Euronews, 2021).

Capturing the public’s attention and raising troubling questions regarding the limits of legitimate police authority in Turkey, serious cases of abuse of police authority at the BU student protests also garnered attention abroad, especially in the international media and academia. In response to international media outlets, including the BBC (2021), the Economist (2021), and many others giving extensive coverage to the student protests. Turkey’s pro-government A News claimed that “the United Kingdom supports the chaos plan,” about the anti-government Gezi Park protests in 2013. They further claimed that the roots of the protests lie with external forces, proposing that the student protesters are the enemies of Turkey and they aim to weaken Turkey (Duvar, 2021). Such a claim has also been used as an instrument to gain the legitimacy of police brutality in the eyes of government loyalists.

The authorities employed any kind of improper methods, including the politics of defamation of women. Sexist, discriminatory, derogatory, and abusive language was also used. Reflecting his attitude toward women, not mentioning her name and undervaluing her remarkable national and international academic reputation, President Erdoğan (Gazete Duvar, 2021) attacked and resorted to misogyny and hate speech against Prof. Ayşe Bugra, a distinguished professor in economics at the BU, stating: “The wife of the representative of the Soros [Foundation] in this country is also the woman among the provocateurs in the Boğaziçi.” This is gender oppression within an oppressive social structure based on gender inequality and it was again demonstrated...
that “the woman has no name.” For the President, the only status of a woman is being someone’s wife, daughter, or sister; nothing more! Whereas in academia, Prof. Bugra is regarded as one of the top academics in economics in Turkey, with an admirable international publication record (Bugra, 2021). It would also be helpful to compare Prof. Bugra’s academic performance with other rectors’ academic performance in Turkey. In a study, it was found that among the 196 rectors in Turkey, the number of rectors without international publications was 68, and the number of rectors whose publications were not cited was 71 (Alan, 2019).

Gender is an important concept that needs to be taken into consideration (Hulagu, 2021: 5). Gender inequality is a universal phenomenon that women are seen only as one’s mother, wife, or daughter (Booth, 2021: 4) and as property to be dominated. Women’s rights movements criticize this gendered view of what is called the objectification of women and form the basis of gender inequality. The objectification of women also causes widespread social apathy and indifference toward their rights and victimization. Women take their place in the lives of men, not as equal and free individuals, but merely as property to be protected. Women in the criminal justice system are viewed and treated differently from men often owing to their ‘double deviancy’ (Booth, 2021: 2). As was the case at the BU protests, patriarchy marginalizes women and other marginalized groups. Ascribed reputation (Boots, 2021: 12–13) has potentially damaging consequences for especially women protesters, the LGBT, and other marginalized groups. It must also be noted that the gender gap in “law and order” policies has been widening (Bahar, 2018).

Regime Change, Human Rights, and the EU

Security state, which seeks to discipline and oppress its citizens rather than serve, is becoming a broader trend not only in Turkey but also across the world. The criminalization of protestors is not unique to authoritarian regimes like Turkey. It has become a trend seen in many countries, including supposedly more democratic ones (Weis, 2021). The gradual transformation from established electoral democracy to authoritarianism in Turkey has led to an intensification of the arbitrary police force and criminalization of citizens. Following a referendum held in 2017, the transition from a parliamentary system to a presidential system was enacted, and the president was given largely unchecked authority. In the absence of external and internal pressure, a system of checks and balances, and separation of powers, President Erdoğan did not hesitate to use this authority to consolidate his power. The coup attempt was referred to as a “gift from God” by the President, and it was also used as a pretext for purging and arresting more than 150,000 individuals from the military, the criminal justice system, education, academia, the media, and other public institutions. The author of this article was included in these purged and detainees. In this “unlawful and awful” period, private companies were seized, some foundation universities were closed, thousands of private schools and NGOs were closed, and some of their employees and volunteers were imprisoned. Democratic steps taken by Turkey to enter the EU stopped; indeed, there is even evidence of a backward movement. Relations between the EU and Turkey have now been limited only to bilateral trade and policies concerned with keeping nearly four million Syrian refugees in Turkey.

Although the EU membership process requires democratization, it is claimed that “internationally, legal and administrative mechanisms for human rights protections offer relatively limited opportunities for change. Monitoring bodies and courts tend to be ‘avowedly state-centric’ as they work within state-defined processes and structures.” (Weber & Pickering, 2011: 213, in Harris & Stanley, 2017: 12). As a result, the EU leaves the citizens of Turkey at the mercy of the regime by remaining silent, even if the European Human Rights Court’s (EHRC) decisions are not implemented. Evidenced by the Freedom House (2021) democracy index, losing its status to “non-free countries” for recent years and ranking at 146 among 195 countries, Turkey has been in a very negative political climate where democratization processes are suspended, and fundamental human rights and freedoms are easily violated. Police violence against the BU students must be considered within this brutal social construction of political reality, in which those opposing the authorities are suppressed by stigmatization and criminalization as terrorists. Student and faculty protests at the BU demonstrate some lessons about how to resist authoritarian pressure.

Hulagu proposes (2021: 3) “the so-called two phases of the AKP governments in Turkey: The reformist and the authoritarian phases.” Reforms on human rights had to be carried out by the AKP which wanted to increase internal and external support and overthrow military tutelage (Hulagu, 2021; Piran, 2013). “Many EU-funded multi-stakeholder projects were designed to democratize the state in Turkey (Hulagu, 2021: 4).” In addition, the AKP had to respond to the democratic demands of the elites in human rights activists, lawyers, business circles, academics, journalists, and many more. However, for police reforms to be successful, constitutional and judicial reforms are required. Structural and cultural negativities caused by the statist tradition in Turkey stand as obstacles to effective reforms (Piran, 2013). Hulagu (2021: 5) calls the reforms in the field of human rights, policing, and citizenship rights “democracy without democrats.”
Conclusion

In this essay, I have tried to demonstrate the institutionalized abuse of power that resides at the heart of “law and order” politics in Turkey. To suppress all discontent, student protests, and demands for academic freedom, transparency, and accountability, as well as freedom in everyday lifestyle, the authorities resort to a political strategy of division and student victimization. There has been a two-way relationship between politics and lifestyles in Turkey, where both reinforce each other. There were debates over ‘secularism and lifestyles’ in the early years of the AKP. Now, the debates on ‘Islam and lifestyles’ dominate the political agenda. It is argued that “religion has become a new or re-born element of the ‘new Turkey’” and has been transforming many areas such as the media, the Kurdish issue, implementation of the rule of law, foreign policy, and gender issues (Yavuz & Öztürk, 2019: 1). A recent example of a controversial de facto nationwide ban is the Ministry of the Interior’s alcoholic beverage sales ban under the pretext of the Covid-19 pandemic during a 17-day lockdown (Soylu, 2021). This clear attempt to control people’s lifestyles is part of the political project that points toward a visible Islamization with the AKP’s intersections of markets and politics, and the design of consumer politics as well as with other political, social, and economic efforts. This is called “a violent and comprehensive regime change, following the 15 July 2016 failed coup (Yılmaz & Turner, 2019). Emergency policies, new judicial repression strategies, and intensifying crackdown on political opposition, academia, media, and civil society have been accompanying this regime change.”

Trapped in identity politics (Tol, 2018), Turkey has been on the one hand, distancing itself from the EU requirements, but on the other, continuing to make statements on its commitment to the ideal of the EU membership. Synthetic articulation of Islamist politics by neoliberal capitalism is the reason behind the seemingly contradictory policies of the AKP regime from social to cultural to foreign policy. The localization of neoliberalism through Islamist politics has today penetrated the relations of both the state and society. Thus, while the AKP talks about freedom in the morning, it can implement a policy that seizes people’s vested social rights in the evening (Yücesan-Özdemir & Coşar, 2012).

The police brutality at the BU student protests seems to be a recurrent phenomenon rather than an exception or anomaly. Given the authoritarian regime changes, the BU student protests now serve as a vehicle of the authorities for condemning and punishing citizens who demand accountability, democracy, and transparency in the affairs of public institutions as well as in other areas of both private and public spheres. In this essay, I have attempted to show how state-sanctioned regimes of truth are corrupted and distorted in ways that deny justice to the most deserving, opening the discussion on the unrecognized truths about people subjected to state coercion and the strategies of the powerful to hide their responsibility for furthering their repression.

Police violence during the BU student protests provides an engaging and insightful understanding of oppressive government techniques by uncovering how the authorities subvert ‘truth’ through institutional and discriminatory networks of abusive power. In the 1990s and early 2000s, there was a notorious link between the regime, the state, and the police in Turkey. The police were operating in a police state and it was normalized to resort to police violence at the institutional and individual levels. However, in general, the existence of institutional police violence was always denied by the authorities, and those who resorted to abuse of police authority were called “inexperienced young officers or rotten apples in the basket” and they were said to be faced with prosecution for their unlawful actions. During the first decade of the 2000s, the efforts in the EU process and pressure from the EHRC weakened, although did not completely eliminate, the illegal and undemocratic partnership between the regime, the state, and the police. Now, the complicity between the regime, the state, and the police has been re-established. Although the answers are obvious, the BU protests raise some key questions about the relations between police, state, and society: Are police answerable to the law? Do they act on behalf of the community? Are they accountable?

The fact that the Turkish police are not answerable to the law, they do not act on behalf of the community, and they are under the mantle of the government makes them the most powerful; those who ought to control the police have no answer. A political game, named “governance versus dominance” has been played between the students and the state. As the students call for governance, the state tries to maintain its dominance over them by resorting to coercive force and symbolic violence, aimed at attacking not only their physical wellbeing but also their dignity. For the police, one of the purposes of the violence against students was to create a spectacle of force. By resorting to violence against the students, the state would send a strong message not only to the BU, but also to students at other universities, workers, peasants whose lands were expropriated, the unemployed, and women demanding gender equality together with all other discontented individuals and groups. If they participate in protests, they will receive the same response from the authorities. To create “fear of losing dignity, rationality and sanity; fear of violence and its consequences” Scraton’s (2009, p. 74) the same message was of course sent to...

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particular ethnic, racial, and class groups and especially to sexual minorities, including the LGBT communities.

As seen during the BU student protest, why does the state resort to violence, or allow it to happen? The state’s control and domination policies are behind the violence against the people. Akgül (2016, p. 11) asserts a line of argument between structural patriarchy and oppression, claiming that “patriarchy is a system above everything else that requires confrontation and contestation. Therefore, for her, most male subjects are oppressed in the same manner that women are oppressed since a culture of patriarchal oppression creates its own masculine and feminine subjects to sustain the order-preserving centralization of power” (Akgül, 2016, p. 14).

Thus, while women demanding gender equality in the streets of Istanbul are subjected to violence, men who demand a democratically elected rector at the BU campus can also be subjected to all kinds of violence. Of course, during the BU protests, the police used violence against all gender identities.

It is well known that President Erdoğan sees the public as his subjects. Taking this attitude into account, during the BU student protests, in an open letter to President Erdoğan, the students spoke to power: “Do not confuse us with those who obey you unconditionally. You are not a sultan, and we are not subjects” (Busch & Pehlivan, 2021). President Erdoğan does not see himself only as “the president” of a democratic Turkey, where citizens enjoy fundamental human rights and freedoms. He behaves as if he is the father of the nation, and he has the right to dictate how all citizens should think and live. When [his] nation opposes his world views and policies, he thinks that he is entitled to discipline them by any means necessary, including oppression and denying their rights. He has his own morality, and he imposes lifestyles accordingly. That is why, as said earlier, the protests turned out to be a ‘zero-sum game’ between the President and the students.

President Erdoğan’s attitudes and policies have resulted in, as recent statistics show, Turkish youth having very few opportunities in the country amid seemingly endless political crises and deepening economic troubles. According to a poll in September 2020, over half of the young people said that they were unhappy, 90 percent expressed the belief that older generations did not understand them, and 76 percent wanted to live abroad if given the chance. Unsurprisingly, the same poll suggested that only a quarter of Turks between 18 and 35 vote for the AKP. In 2020, 330,000 Turks emigrated, nearly half of them being between the ages of 15 and 35 (Büyük, 2020).

Why do the Turkish police use violence against students? “Policing inevitably occurs within a context of structured social inequality and conflict. It means understanding the reality that the policing of ‘a divided social order may be more or less harmonious and consensual, or overtly oppressive, with important consequences’” (Reiner, 1985, p. 47, in Newborn, 206, p. 4). Given a polarized society over identity politics and discriminatory policies and practices in Turkey, the police lost its legitimacy in the eyes of some sections of the public because they are regarded as unfair, dishonest, and untrustworthy. The police also do not rely on public support and do not demand public legitimacy. With the authoritarian regime, the basis of consensual policing in Turkey was destroyed, and it would seem that the establishment of harmonious relationships between police and society is impossible. Given this chaotic climate, while police violence is not new, it has become more apparent. In the absence of legitimacy and accountability, the police do not hide their abuse of powers; on the contrary, police violence, which is a public health issue (Feldman, 2015), was on public display during the BU student protests.

The AKP always claimed to have a “service state” understanding in the first years of its rule. Service state takes the whole domain of human welfare for its province and would solve all economic and social ills through its administrative activities. However, since its establishment in 1923, the authoritarian state form that constitutes the determining character of the state–society relations in Turkey continues, it also forms the basis of the police saying ‘l’etat c’est moi’. The Directorate General of Security issued a circular recently that bans recording voices and images at demonstrations. While the reason for the ban is claimed to protect the privacy of the police, the main reason is to prevent the collection of evidence about the police who abuse their authority (Bianet, 2021b). In the absence of an independent police inspectorate, and monitoring organizations like the Ombudsman or the Human Rights Commission, police are not citizens in uniforms who provide services. As seen during the BU students’ protests, they are agents of the State; they are agents of oppression and they perform violent functions.

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