

**Turkish Higher Education
in Transition from a Formal Autonomy
to Academic Freedom via State Corporatism**

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This paper is concerned with contrasting concepts (models) on how best to organise Turkish Higher Education. It employs concepts of university "autonomy" as described by the late Professor Hirsch (1950), "academic freedom" as it prevails in democratic countries of the world and "corporatist" tendencies as observed by Levy (1978) in Latin America and State "corporationism" as exercised by the **YÖK** (Higher Education Council) of Turkey.

1 Introduction

Nearly twenty years have passed since my first paper on the "University-State Relation in Turkey." (Güvenç 1970) There I had described the situation from a futuristic position that if, in the long run, we were not going to be able to maintain the formal autonomy, as conceived by Hirsch (Hirsch 1950) and guaranteed by the 1961 Constitution, we might as well try the institutional pluralism of corporations. Things and events have not developed as predicted, as it were.

In 1972, the University law (4936/1946) was repealed and succeeded by a new law (1750/1972), and a Supreme Council of State Supervision was introduced. Though profusely defined by the law, this provision was immediately challenged, and declared to be unconstitutional by the Court. It was dead before it went into effect. During the years of 1973-80, university campuses, along with other public or municipal institutions, gradually became a battle-ground of ideological warfare. It was a chaos just short of a declared war. Academies could only function under armed (military) surveillance. *De jure* autonomy was not possible.

The Armed Forces of the Republic intervened - for the third time - on Sept 12, 1980, to put an end to more vital developments. Soon thereafter, the martial administration of the Security Council decided to revise the university law. After a brief and summary debate, the result was the establishment of the Higher Education Council, known in Turkish with the acronym YÖK (The Law 2547/1982). The principles of this law were also incorporated into the 1982 Constitution. Hence YÖK was seen, symbolically, as a political or ideological reaction of the patrimonial state to an era marked by anarchy. Universities were thus being disciplined for not coping with terror and violence, and not keeping out of political struggles.

Old universities were reorganized in accordance with the new law, state academies and higher schools, along with teacher training institutes, were consolidated as metropolitan universities and some 12 new ones were established, for healthier distribution of the State service. The faculty were to be supplied by the well established ones on a "rotational" basis. Candidates for promotion had to go on rotation. Take it or leave it. Many left. The staff who objected or resisted were either dismissed or forced to resign. The Martial Administration Law (1402) was amended to accelerate the due process, by blocking the right to appeal to higher courts.. Similar measures were observed in non-academic institutions and bureaucracy (Agac 1989). The whole operation soon turned to a well

planned state purge. The law 1402 became a symbol of it, with a brown envelope sent by the Martial Headquarter. Before the end of martial administration, the YÖK President was given martial authorities comparable to those of the 1402 Commanders. The President wisely declined to use them. After 1983 and especially after the civilian government was endorsed by Parliament, YÖK became one of the most popular topics of daily press. The State President EVREN often defended YÖK on TV. This is what he would say:

- (1) Turkish universities, held responsible for the anarchy, are not worthy of autonomy and justly deserved the straight-jacket fitted them.
- (2) YÖK is a modern and advanced system of higher education. Those who criticize YÖK are either guilty of (a) treachery or treason (**hain**), or (b) anachronism and obscurantism, or (c) lazy-freeloaders, or (d) innocent by-standers deceived by those above.

Professor Dogramaci, the YÖK president, on the other hand, defended the new system with a more paradoxial strategy, on grounds that

- (1) Turkish universities under YÖK, are now more autonomous than ever before, second perhaps only to the British.
- (2) Problems are not structural but financial (economic).
- (3) Criticism is not institutional but of personal nature.
- (4) More students are now receiving better higher education - statistically.

The only shortcoming of the system, according to the YÖK President, might be that YÖK was not adequately publicized. It was the **PR** of the system rather than the President that failed.

2 From Autonomy to Incorporation

In this introduction I have tried to summarize recent innovations. Now, I would like to return to our autonomous institutions before YÖK and review some of their deficiencies.

Some of the organizational weaknesses of the autonomous university may be indentified as follows:

- (1) The law was only concerned with affairs of academic staff. Students and auxiliary personnel were not provided for.
- (2) The system existed by and for itself without any obligation to society or State, i.e., the social change and economic development.
- (3) Autonomy, based on distinction or separation of sciences and politics, was silent on "science policy", "economy politic" and "political science." I had therefore suggested (Güvenç 1970) a more holistic (business-like or corporational) management, including for example:
 - (a) Student and alumni services,
 - (b) effective plant management and steady development,
 - (c) moral obligations to society and state,
 - (d) over-all planning and organisational reforms,
 - (e) self-control measures to prevent likely external interventions.

In terms of Weberian (ideal) types, I was proposing a pluralistic model, reminiscent of modern business "corporations." Later developments have rather paralleled the "corporatist patterns" found in Latin American States. (Levy 1978) In other words, unable to develop corporate structures, Turkish universities became a target (or prey) of state corporatism.

3 Current Issues and Controversies

After YÖK, public debates have generally concentrated on the following dichotomies:

- (1) State control versus autonomy,
- (2) corporate uniformity vs. institutional plurality or diversity,
- (3) state ownership vs. foundation sponsorship (public or private?),
- (4) high-tech sciences vs. liberal arts and humanities,
- (5) quantity vs. quality (universality or excellence?),
- (6) teaching in Turkish or foreign languages,
- (7) social System Accounting (guilty or not guilty?),
- (8) YÖK vs. No-YÖK (What is next? What are the prospects?).

State Control vs Institutional Autonomy

Academic staff is convinced that state interference is the source of all ills encountered in the university. Hence the reglementation imposed by and through YÖK, must be lifted and the autonomy restored - the sooner the better. This restoration (i.e., election of administrators by the staff) is the precondition of peace and order on campus.

The State or the (YÖK) Council, on the other hand, contends that such a concept of autonomy is obsolete. State universities, which never had financial autonomy, are free to enjoy academic autonomy. The state approval or appointment of deans and rectors will only help to bridge the gap yawning wide between the State and its universities.

The heart of the problem lies in the question: Is academic (scientific) autonomy possible under political (ideological) supervision? Hand-picked rectors and their deans are said to be of rightist tendencies and favoring the candidates of simular ideology (Turk-Islam synthesis). So, in the near future, this ideology is likely to control academic autonomy. The related questions are thus reduced to election or appointment dichotomy without a solution or resolution in sight. Meanwhile the concept of academic freedom stands unattended. Young staff without tenure are reluctant or afraid to speak out. (Güvenç 1987)

Uniformity vs. Plurality

Academicians complain that YÖK has converted academia into bureaucratic organizations and scholars into clerks. Further state corporatism is reducing the hierarchy of institutions to their lowest common function (classroom teaching) rather than raising them to their highest common purpose (research and education). (Türkiye Günlüğü 1989)

The State, on the other hand, stands firm that autonomy or pluralism, as defended by scholars, is a thing of the past, gone with the wind. Scholars must now come out of their ivory towers and face the realities of life. The State further claims that autonomous institutions of the past were indifferent to national problems and pursued their own purposes. It is, therefore, the responsibility of State to see to it that academic autonomy is not interpreted as an oligarchic irresponsibility.

State vs. Foundation or Public vs. Private

Universities in Turkey have always been founded by the state. The only exception (the American Robert College in Istanbul) has, in due course, been converted to a State (Bogazici) University. Under pressure from financial holdings, the University law was recently amended, giving the State authority to charter non-profit foundations and corporations for establishing new institutions. The only condition being that rectors and deans will either be appointed or approved by the State (i.e., YÖK). Several applications for charter have either been turned down or withdrawn. So, there is today only one private university: **Bilkent**. Chairman Dogramaci of the corporation has been chartered by the President Dogramaci of YÖK. Bilkent university is doing so well that it is now asking for state subsidies.

High-Tech Sciences vs. Liberal-Arts and Humanities

One of the marked policy changes under YÖK has been the shift from social sciences to the high-tech sciences such as the computer sciences, electronics, communication technology and information. Bilkent followed by ITÜ, Marmara, Ege, Uludag and Cukurova Universities are now attracting the better students to these new fields. Arts and humanities are left to the third-stringers. The trend is so popular that the new university law being drafted by the government is said to be creating a new type of institution to be popularly known as **Özgün** (original) university. This university will be able to

- (1) Charge fees and tuitions higher than the State,
- (2) teach high-tech in foreign languages, i.e. English,
- (3) come under a board of trustees - rather than YÖK.

Those who object this "new idea" of original university, hold that

- (1) the idea of university has always been based on *Arte liberale*, therefore, the problems of high-tech make humanities even more vital,
- (2) the new model is taken from Bilkent (founded by Dogramaci),
- (3) teaching in English will hurt the development of Turkish as a modern language of science and technology,

- (4) if the private Bilkent is in fact so successful, as compared to the State universities, why is it that the autonomous universities were so readily surrendered to state corporatism?

Quantity vs. Quality: Production or Productivity

Nearly twofold increase in universities but threefold increase in access to higher education - all in the course of 6 years - have provoked cries of "quality loss." More and more students are being educated less and less. Critics challenge that under the YÖK, universities have been reduced to technical (vocational) high schools, staff members to teaching machines, and crowds of graduates to guinea-pigs. These boldly conducted experiments yield however no better prospects for future.

YÖK officials, on the other hand, contend that access to higher education in Turkey was so low that something had to be done hurriedly to raise it to 12 % and eventually to even 25 % of the age population. The oversupply will no doubt create its own market and demand. The wider the base the higher quality in the near future, they say.

Widening the popular base will no doubt contribute to rising of quality but the majority of state universities have no means for improving the standards. While, for example, the number of graduate schools has gone up ten times, graduate registration stands still at only twofold. Inflationary economics have badly hurt academic operations. Over or nearly 95 % of the budgets is now earmarked and spent for personnel. The majority of universities have no funds available for capital investments. Supporting foundations are already set up but endowments are slow to come. While production quotas are being met the over-all productivity of the system is trailing behind.

Language of Instruction : Turkish or Foreign

Although YÖK had originally required remedial Turkish language instruction towards compensating systemic deficiencies, carried over from the secondary schools, the language of instruction has become one of the hotly debated issues. While there is a confusion about teaching of English and teaching in English, debates continue whether or not we should teach in English. Nevertheless, better universities are encouraged by the State and YÖK to teach in foreign languages.

Opponents hold that universities, just like the secondary and informal institutions, should teach not only one but several modern languages; yet, keep Turkish as the national language of instruction and communication. (Daily Cumhuriyet 1989)

"Social System Accounting" (Gross 1966)

A former staff member has recently drawn a balance sheet of things contributed and taken away by, YÖK. He gave YÖK credit for:

- (1) Cutting the supply of fresh blood by eliminating assistantship,
- (2) lowering the standards of scholarship,
- (3) discouraging research and publications,
- (4) reducing quality of higher education (through large numbers), and debit for:
- (5) destroying the image of academic respectability,
- (6) creating a private university feeding on, or exploiting the state funds of public universities,
- (7) creating an irresponsible administration, manufacturing unreliable figures and padded statistics,
- (8) cooperating with the Martial Law administration in the State "purge" of academies,
- (9) dispensing generously with the concept of "autonomy", so essential for academic enterprise.

The balance sheet as drawn above is all in the red and negative. (Kon-gar)

In a special collection of essays dealing with similar issues facing the university, however, authors seem to agree in the diagnosis that YÖK should be seen as the effect of socio-cultural processes, rather than as the cause of all ills. Hence, they warn that autonomy may not be a **panacea**. They add, however, that it is equally impossible to explain or discuss Turkish Higher Education without due reference to YÖK. (Daily Cumhuriyet 1989)

Another point of observation left unattended has been the slow but steady favoritism to the religious right, known in Turkish as the "**Türk-Islam Sentezi**". So much that if academic elections were held today, some members fear that their candidates would certainly win in a number of faculties.

YÖK or No YÖK !?

Columnists, editors, along with academics have been publicly discussing the problems and prospects after YÖK. There seems to be a general agreement among writers and scholars that although some functions of YÖK will perhaps be always needed, YÖK has now completed its historical mission, or political usefulness. It may be high time for a radical reform or restoration. Retiring members of the Presidential Advisory Council seem confident, however, that the YÖK system will be retained under the present (civilian) and future (democratic) governments.

4 Discussion and Evaluation

Undeniably, Turkey is in a state of flux. What is happening in the University merely reflects the changes that the country is going through. Some call it "great leap forward" (**Çag atlama**), others see it as an islamic restoration. Whatever the diagnosis, the Turkish nation is experiencing, surviving and looking ahead of several epoch making processes: her **renaissance** as a folk, **reformation** as a muslim community, **enlightenment** as a nation, **nationhood** as a state and **initiation** as a Society - all at once. This is no easy task. All these reforms and their restorations are in full swing.

As suggested by Kiliçbay (Türkiye Günlüğü 1989), academic freedom is not possible without popular support of free enquiry. If we keep coming back to the **principle of autonomy** it is not for the sake of autonomy, but for **academic freedom**. We need and want autonomy as a shield of freedom. We want academic freedom so that we will have a free university or freedom of expression, and disbelief. Western societies believe in the power of science because they have witnessed what magic science can do. Modern world is a product of science and technology, whereas wonders and powers of science are still in a hypothetical phase in Turkey. They are not produced nationally but imported and adopted. If science can be imported for less, why spend so much more to produce it nationally. Unless we make science, however, how can we ever hope to catch up with contemporary civilization?

5 Concluding Remarks

In Weberian types or terms, the Turkish university system has made a rapid transition from a constitutional autonomy after the German University, via the centralized or (State) corporatist model found in the Latin world. Although this corporatism of Turkey (AgaÇ 1989) has been compared to Centralism, as a political system, it functioned more like the Latin American cases. If the present tide continues towards liberal economy, Turkish universities are bound to become more like the U.S. corporations. The questions of academic freedom will then hopefully follow the course and processes of democratisation. (GüvenÇ 1988) Academic institutions are likely to be affected by the political developments of perestroyka in the Eastern Europe. If, however, the Latin Americanisation of U.S. politics continues (Wiards 1977), Turkish universities may fall in line with the Mexican type of pluralism or corporatism.

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