

**Opening Statement by Ebru Erdem-Akcay  
for  
Helsinki Commission Lantos Commission Joint Briefing on Turkish Referendum  
Turkey Post-Referendum: Institutions and Human Rights**

The July 2016 coup-attempt only accelerated the ongoing authoritarian trajectory in Turkey; it gave the government extra vigor in its human right violations. I will illustrate this argument with the case of “Academics for Peace”.

In June 2015 parliamentary elections, for the first time since 2002, Justice and Development Party failed to gain enough seats to achieve a majority in parliament. The political uncertainty after the election contributed to the violent turn that the conflict in the Kurdish towns in the southeast took. The ongoing civil conflict evolved into urban warfare, which has different dynamics and impact compared to rural warfare. Larger numbers of residents were caught in the crossfire, tens of thousands had to flee their homes, neighborhoods blocks away from the governor’s offices were shelled, people trapped in their homes under curfews had hard time finding bread to eat let alone ambulance for the wounded.

Terrible news, heart wrenching images were trickling through to the rest of the country. In January 2016, a group of scholars called Academics for Peace protested the ongoing violence and called for a peaceful solution to the conflict in a peace petition, titled “We will not be a party to this crime.” The statement demanded an end to the ongoing intentional indiscriminate violence and siege in the region, identification and punishment of those who violated human rights during the sieges, permission of international observers to study and report the conditions. They denounced all forms of government suppression on the opposition.

At the time of the declaration on January 11th, 1128 scholars had signed the petition. They were women and men who worked as faculty, researchers, and doctoral students at public and private universities across the country. It would be fair to say that they are all left-leaning, democratic, progressive individuals, many with activist experiences. By the time the petition was closed to signatures on January 18th, a total of 2212 scholars, including myself, had signed on.

Right after the public declaration of the petition, the signatories became the targets of Erdoğan himself, other AKP leaders, the Higher Education Council, university administrators, convicted mafia leaders, ultranationalist thugs on campuses, and local nationalist and pro-government media. The signatories faced real threats to their lives and security. Their photos were published in local media as traitors, their campus office doors were marked with red paint, they received threat letters under their office doors. They were threatened with death and/or rape, insulted, and harassed on social media. They were branded as PKK militants, Erdoğan himself called them traitors. Mafia leader Sedat Peker said he would “spill their blood in streams and shower in it.”

Local prosecutors and university administrators started legal and disciplinary investigations respectively. All 1411 signatories who lived in Turkey at the time are currently subject to criminal investigations but they were not told what they are charged with. This case is at the investigation stage and has not gone to court yet. Four Academics for Peace were held in pretrial detention for a month for reiterating the content of the peace petition and outlining the retaliation Academics for Peace faced. They are free pending trial and their case is ongoing. Fifty-six scholars were briefly detained and had their homes and offices searched in the weeks following the declaration and the outrage. To this date, there have not been any court decisions convicting any signatories with charges related to the peace petition.

Those Academics for Peace who had contractual positions had their contracts terminated soon after. One hundred and twenty-two were dismissed, forced to resign or retire. However, it is not as “easy” to dismiss faculty who have more secure positions, similar to tenure in the US. Dismissing them involves bureaucratic actions such as investigations by a committee, defense statements, and HEC approvals. Moreover, these decisions can be appealed and reversed by the courts. Between January and July 2016, 505 investigations were ongoing and some contract terminations were reversed by the courts.

The coup-attempt led to the declaration of State of Emergency, which has been extended every 3 months ever since. State of Emergency rule allows rule by governmental decree, effectively bypassing the legislature and bureaucratic regulations. It is through these decrees that the government was able to ban hundreds of thousands from public service employment and cancel their passports. The 7317 “purged” academics cannot find employment in any public university and private universities refrain from hiring them. Those who were able to secure fellowships or visiting positions abroad had to forgo these opportunities because they do not have passports anymore. There is no legal recourse for the “purge” decision, both Higher Administrative Court and the Constitutional Court have declined appeals.

Three hundred seventy two Academics for Peace who could not be dismissed through the process required by law were dismissed overnight with the cabinet’s signatures. Sixty-six of the 484 academics dismissed by decree on April 29, 2017 were Academics for Peace. Seven Academics for Peace who were recently “purged” from Dicle University in Diyarbakir, the major province in the southeast, were detained on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017. There is no expectation of justice anytime soon because the judicial system itself is undermined by the purges and it is overwhelmed with the large volume of cases.

The coup-attempt failed but it enabled the government to dismiss Academics for Peace, bypassing the required official procedure and to punish these dissenters in ways that it could not do under no-State of Emergency. It was known from Erdogan’s comments in January 2016 that these scholars would pay a price for signing the petition, but the price was steep and collected more swiftly thanks to the coup-attempt.

**Bio:**

Ebru Erdem-Akcay is a political scientist and Turkey analyst. She received her PhD at Stanford University in 2006 and served as an Assistant Professor at University of California Riverside until 2013. She studies identity politics, ethnic conflict, gender equality, and political Islam in Turkey. She is a signatory to the Peace Petition, which called on the Turkish government to stop the ongoing violence in the Kurdish dominated southeastern Turkey. She has been involved in the solidarity efforts among the Academics for Peace, most prominently in collecting, organizing, and disseminating the data on administrative and legal retaliation against Academics for Peace.