

# The Rise of Anti-Intellectualism in light of the AKP's Education Policy

Written by Çağlar Ezikoğlu

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ÇAĞLAR EZİKOĞLU, FEB 10 2018

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has urged the removal of the Transition from Primary to Secondary Education (TEOG) exam in Turkey, saying that he finds the practice wrong. "Don't we have lackings in national education? Yes, we do. We will overcome those. For instance, I don't want this TEOG thing anymore and I find it wrong now. It needs to be removed," Erdoğan told private broadcaster A Haber late on Sept. 15, as he added that "they didn't complete their education with TEOG." Immediately after this statement, AKP (Justice and Development Party-*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) officials acted and declared that they would begin the necessary arrangements for the removal of TEOG. On the other hand, opponents criticized the government's preparations to remove the TEOG exam system. With the removal of the examination system, favoritism can be increased when entering high school. This is, in fact, an indication of how the AKP has stepped up its education policies and how it has boosted anti-intellectualism throughout the country. This article analyzes how this process has taken place.

### The Logic of Anti-Intellectualism in Turkey under AKP Rule

This article begins with an example from 2014 to highlight AKP's anti-intellectualism. Presidential elections for the twelfth President of Turkey were held on 10 August 2014 and the leading candidates, AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and – the CHP's (Republican People's Party-*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*) and MHP's (Nationalist Action Party- *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*) candidate Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu – clashed in this election. These two political figures are very different from each other. Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu has international experience and a background as an academic (Çarkoğlu, 2014: 4). Erdoğan focused on İhsanoğlu's high profile during the election campaigns. Thus, when İhsanoğlu was emphasizing his experience on international affairs, Erdoğan would reply that Turkey needs a president, not a diplomat. When he highlighted he speaks three languages, Erdoğan easily debunked and dismissed the argument by saying 'Oh, he speaks three languages? That's great, but you see, we are looking for someone to run the country here and we already have plenty of translators'. When he would try to capitalise on his diplomatic background, Erdoğan would mock him by calling him '*mon cher*', a French expression used to make fun of 'cocktail party diplomats' and their supposedly mundane life, making İhsanoğlu look arrogant, elitist, and cut off from the people. 'They ask a candidate whether he will address the issue of roads (construction) if elected. He replies he has nothing to do with roads ... They are *mon cher* but we are servants,' Erdoğan told thousands of supporters in a rally in the eastern province of Erzurum.

Obviously, Erdoğan's educational background is very low-profile compared to that of most Turkish politicians. During his childhood, he went to an *İmam Hatip* school to study Islamic sciences along with the regular curriculum. The teachers in *İmam Hatip* schools would always criticise alternative lifestyles and attack the country's Westernisation project in early Republican period. Due to their Islamic character, the schools promote and encourage the Islamic lifestyle as the only moral way of living. Erdoğan once observed: 'I owe everything to the *İmam Hatip* school I attended. My life was predestined in that school. I have learned patriotism, love for fellow human beings, service for the country, worship of God, environmental sciences, spirit of solidarity, and wishing for others what I want for me'.

Erdoğan believes that Western academics have underestimated the Anatolian people and Anatolian traditions. There are some interesting events to show Erdoğan's reaction against academics during the last term of AKP rule. One of

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them is the youth protest against Erdoğan during his visit to the Middle East Technical University. At the time, approximately 3,600 police officers protected Erdoğan against 300 student protesters. This was six months before the Gezi protests. Erdoğan condemned not only the students for “terrorising” the campus, but also the academics for supporting their right to protest. He suggested that these academics should quit academia and join the protesters, since an academic’s job is simply to teach students valuable information, like how to use a computer. He said ‘I condemn all academics who support these protests. We do not need teachers like this.’

Anti-intellectualism in the AKP government cannot be proved only by the statements of Erdoğan or the AKP alone. This situation is also understood through the use of policy tools. The government has clamped down on the independence of the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey and the Turkish Academy of Sciences. Most significantly, there has been a significant increase in the number of foundation/private universities following the AKP’s third term. This neo-liberal restructuring of the higher education sector was inevitably complemented with the articulation of conservative/Islamist symbols as the basis of social construction. The AKP’s pressure on the universities will also lead to the presence of Islamists close to the AKP in university administrations. The AKP has maintained an anti-intellectual line of polarisation in the academic world by making an ‘us and them’ dichotomy. The academics – ‘them’ – who supported the Gezi Park protests or the peace campaign on the Kurdish issue mentioned above have been oppressed, fired or arrested. Another factor that this chapter has focused on is the *İmam Hatip* schools. After 2011, the AKP continued its policy of polarisation by increasing support for *İmam Hatip* schools. Since 2010-2011, 1,477 general high schools were shut down. The increase in *İmam Hatip* schools is 73%. Vocational high schools have increased by 23% and Anatolian high schools by 57%. The fact that one school type has increased its numbers by 73% reveals the political and bureaucratic will behind opening *İmam Hatip* schools. There is a positive discrimination applied by the AKP government to *İmam Hatip* schools across the country. This situation cannot be generalised as the AKP’s polarisation created through religious education will directly lead to anti-intellectualism. However, this polarisation strategy has not led to an improvement in the field of education due to the role model of *İmam Hatips* as an alternative to secular schools. For instance, the number of Turkish 15-year-olds who scored below average on the triennial PISA test, which is conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), is three times more than the number of students who scored below average in more successful countries, according to test results.

The second important issue for Erdoğan’s conservative education policy is the denial of any Ottoman legacy in the educational system against the Kemalist modernisation process. According to Erdoğan, the Kemalist Westernisation process has damaged the notion of the Ottoman-Arabic legacy in education.

Erdoğan said in December 2014 that, due to the alphabet reform that brought in the use of Latin letters conducted by the modern Turkish Republic’s founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, in 1927, the quality of the Turkish language had regressed.

‘Although we had a very rich (Ottoman) language that was highly convenient for doing and producing science, we woke up one day and we realised that it was gone. People were forced to forget thousands of words and concepts, as they were removed from the dictionaries,’ he said, arguing it was not possible to study philosophy with the current Turkish vocabulary. ‘You will either rely on Ottoman words or concepts from French, English or German. But we have to overcome all of these problems.’ Following this logic, Turkey’s National Education Council introduced mandatory Ottoman language courses in the country’s influential religious high schools and in secular high schools as electives.

This article aims at analysing the rise of anti-intellectualism in Turkey’s education policy under AKP rule. The AKP government has tried to preserve its power, especially in the recent times, with the politics of polarization through the Kemalists and secularists. This polarisation strategy is achieved by various policy mechanisms such as anti-intellectualism. AKP’s traditional and Islamist anti-intellectualism took place against the Kemalist regime’s Western intellectualism during the AKP period. One of the most important results of this strategy is to transform the educational policy of Turkey under AKP rule in the light of anti-intellectualism. This article explores in detail through examples of the growing anti-intellectualism in AKP’s education policy for understanding this phenomenon.

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