Abstract

This article mainly examines the authoritarian shift of the Turkish state which has dramatically escalated after July 15, the failed coup attempt. While analyzing how state power in Turkey attempts to suppress dissident and opposite voices, I will focus particularly on the exercises of state in order to control the realm of knowledge production. State surveillance in Turkey is a complex mixture of sovereign power, disciplinary mechanisms, and digital surveillance. After a brief discussion on state surveillance on academy in Turkey, I will argue the conditions imposed on the dismissed academicians by the state act as a modern form of Agamben’s bare life.

Introduction

This article aims to examine the recent authoritarian shift in Turkey with an emphasis on the state surveillance on academy. I will analyze the surveillance practices exercised by the Turkish state and attempts of the state power to control the knowledge production in Turkey. State surveillance in Turkey has been intensified after the Gezi Parkı protests on June 2013, and dramatically escalated after the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016.

The authoritarian regime in Turkey and control mechanisms of the Turkish state is a multifaceted topic that can be discussed from many different angles. In the first section, I will examine the relation between national security and the state surveillance. Secondly I will discuss state surveillance in Turkey in relation to digitalization and the centralization of the state power that has been particularly developed in the ruling power regime of the Justice and Development Party. Then, I will focus on the effects of the academic purge in Turkey. I will discuss how the results of the purge subject people to civil death as a modern form of Agamben’s ‘bare life’ in the period of the state of emergency, an ongoing process in Turkey which began after the failed coup attempt. Finally, I will argue that the state surveillance on academy is part of the authoritative power mechanisms in Turkey.

What has happened? The Background of the Purge of Academicians in Turkey

On January 10, 2016, over 1,000 academicians from Turkey, calling themselves ‘Academics for Peace,’ and academicians from abroad signed a petition entitled, ‘We will not be a party of this crime.’ This petition calls on the Turkish government to end the violence and inhumane treatments against of the Kurdish population living in the cities of southeast Turkey. After the declaration of the petition, the signee academicians were exposed to the growing assault of the government.
Historically, crackdowns on the academy are not a new phenomenon in Turkey. Korkut Boratav, an academician faced with the state’s oppression during the siege in 1983 notes that the ongoing attitudes of today’s regime against academicians are more violent and the oppression academicians are facing today is much harder than they experienced in 1980s (Oghan 2017).

Following the declaration of the petition, the government harshly criticized the petition, and the signees were accused of doing terrorist propaganda. Parallel to these criticisms, many universities opened administrative investigations about the signatory academicians; some of the academicians were fired without any justification and many of them fled the country to continue their academic work abroad.

The surveillance practices of the government have drastically expanded and intensified following the failed coup attempt on July 15. Right after the coup attempt, a state of emergency was declared and a massive purge has begun to clean up the state and public departments from the networks of FETO, the Islamist Gulenist movement blamed as the main actor of the coup attempt. The dismissals, the temporary detentions, and the custodies of academicians began with the petition crisis and have become a more common practice especially in the ongoing period of the state of emergency. While some of the academicians were accused of having an affiliation with the Gulenist organization, many of the signee academicians were dismissed or arrested in this process with the accusation of having an affiliation with the secular militant Kurdish group PKK.

As Ayse Parla mentions, although the state of emergency was declared as a response to the failed coup attempt, going beyond its own aim, it led to a large-scaled purge in the whole country:

> The emergency was ostensibly declared in response to the failed coup attempt of July 2016, but functions as a catalyst for a nation-wide purge, including the sacking and imprisonment of more than a hundred thousand public employees, politicians, journalists, academics, and ordinary citizens. (Parla 2017)

Today, the surveillance of academicians goes along with the state’s oppression in Turkey. The centralization of state power along with digitalization expands the scope of the state surveillance. The digitalization and the centralization of state power are closely related to the regime of power that becomes prominent in this conjuncture. In *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons*, Banu Bargu defines the regime of power in contemporary societies with the term of biosovereignty. She states:

> Biosovereignty builds on the argument that neither sovereignty, nor discipline, nor security singly defines the dominant characteristic of the contemporary power regime...Consequently, biosovereignty names the emergent regime of power in which techniques targeting the administration of life are brought within the fold of sovereign decisions, while the power of life and death is marshaled in support of life and well-being. (Bargu 2014: 51)

This definition exactly matches with the exercise of the state surveillance in Turkey as a complex mixture of the sovereign power, disciplinary mechanisms, and panspectric surveillance. Neither solely as a disciplinary or a control mechanism, nor as a punishment for alleged crimes, the academic surveillance is an amalgamation of different forms of practices aiming to pacify all kinds of critical voices.

**Protecting the state power: National Security**

Today ‘national security’ and ‘the war on terrorism’ are popular concepts widely emphasized by contemporary states to rationalize the intensification of the state’s surveillance techniques. David Murakami Wood emphasizes that in today’s surveillance societies, surveillance is usually emerged and practiced as a
state’s response to moral panics (2009: 181-183). Buck-Morss’ notion of the absolute enemy is noteworthy to understand how the states legitimize their use of power on the ground of security and defense. As Debxir and Barder discuss, the construction of the absolute enemy is what legitimizes “the sovereign essence of the political” (2012: 96).

The notion of danger and the construction of an enemy have always been used by the states to justify their disciplining and controlling techniques as well as legitimizing their use of violence. “The violent image associated with such agitators in the discourse of ‘social defence’ was the main argument used to justify extending the measure to society as a whole” (Mattelart 2010: 20). The focus on securitization in terms of the exercise of the state surveillance provides the classification and categorization of the individuals around the criteria of “criminality/causing danger.” As Mattelart (2010) exemplifies, “security detention,” the bill that the French government drafted in 2008, suggests keeping people in prison, not for the crimes they have committed, but for the future crimes they might commit. “Indeed, the law authorizes, the detention of criminals sentenced to more than fifteen years in prison once they have completed their sentences” (2010: 22).

The emphasis on terrorism and national security is also the main argument of the Turkish state to rationalize the recent purge in Turkey. When the petition was first declared, Turkish government condemned the signatory academicians for supporting terrorism. It was followed by the witch-hunt of the intellectuals with the goal to pacify the oppositional voices coming from the academy. In a conference right after the petition campaign, Erdogan made the following explanation:

Unfortunately, those fake intellectuals say that the state is carrying out a massacre. Hey you, fake intellectuals! You are dark people. You are not enlightened. You are dark and ignorant to the point that you do not even know where the southeastern or eastern regions are [in Turkey]. (Bulut 2016)

On March 2016, the “Academics for Peace”-Istanbul group held a press conference to reiterate their demands of peace in response to the state’s criticisms. Dr. Esra Mungan, Dr. Kivanc Ersoy, and Dr. Muzaffer Kaya who read the press release on behalf of the “Academics for Peace” were arrested and imprisoned with the accusation of doing terrorist propaganda (Kural 2016). After 38 days, these three academicians and Dr. Meral Camci, who was also arrested because of signing the petition, were released on the first session of the trial (t24 2016).

As stated above, the state’s surveillance and oppression on academicians escalated with the declaration of the state of emergency following the failed coup attempt of July 2016. In the terminology of the Turkish state, the current surveillance practices and the wide-scaled purge began after the failed coup attempt are necessary steps that should be taken in the war against the enemies who target ‘the indivisible integrity of the state with its territory and nation.’

According to the report of Human Rights Joint Platform published on February 23, 2017, during the nine months period of the state of emergency, the number of dismissed academicians reached 4,811, increasing to 7,619 with the addition of academicians who were working in the universities closed after the failed coup attempt. With the last statutory decrees declared right after the Turkey’s constitutional referendum on April 16, 484 more academicians were dismissed.

In this period, some academicians were arrested, some of them are still in custody, and more significantly most of them cannot benefit from their basic citizenship rights now. After the coup attempt, the Turkish state seized the passports of the dismissed academicians, closing their chance of working in other countries.
The accountability of the evidence for the dismissals and the arrests are somehow ambiguous. The academicians are mainly accused of terrorist links either with the Islamist Gulenist movement or with the secular Kurdish militant group PKK. The state justifies its extending measures on the ground of ‘national security.’ However, although the accusations are linked to terrorism, most of the academicians accused of supporting PKK are either members of the leftist unions or the signees of the peace petition with no link to PKK. Obviously, not all of these academicians are signatory academicians, but most of the academicians who were the signees of peace petition are incrementally dismissed from the academy in the period of the state of emergency.

The academician dismissed from his work after the coup attempt, Cihangir Islam, mentions: “I am ashamed to talk because many other people are in a worse situation than me, but they stigmatize us and send back to society. They take away our rights of pension.” He expresses that all these practices are deterrence policies to pacify and silence the government critics (Oghan 2017). Like Cihangir Islam, academicians who were expelled from their work at Ankara University with the statutory decrees also noticed that these dismissals stigmatize them and aims to suppress the oppositional voices against the government (Oghan 2017; Güneysu 2017).

In most of these cases, the social media posts, the personal contacts of academicians or just being a signee of the peace petition are counted as sufficient shreds of evidence for the dismissals or arrests of these academicians (Armutçu et al. 2017). The lack of evidence and the debatable accountability of the evidence in these instances signal the reflection of the state power against the resistance and oppositional groups. The temporary detentions and arrests can be read as the responses of the government to the social unrest and growing discomfort about the authoritarian practices of the Turkish state. In other words, authoritarianism breeds itself in a vicious circle.

Centralization of Power, Digitalization, and Panspectric Surveillance

The panopticism, the main mode of surveillance Foucault (1977) argues to explain the exercise of state power in disciplinary societies gains a multidimensional and multilayered character in today’s modern societies with the extended use of technology in every aspects of life. The Bentham’s panopticon Foucault (1977) uses to define the central seeing power in disciplinary societies, which can observe everything without ever being seen (1977: 200), is no longer the main controlling mechanism in the contemporary societies. The surveillance is situated in digital technology as much as the technology penetrates everyday life.

Kullenberg (2008) explains the transformation of surveillance mechanisms with digital technologies as panspectric surveillance. Referring to Manuel DeLanda, he reminds the concept of panspectron that is originated from war technologies. As DeLanda (1991) argues, human bodies are no longer positioned around a central monitor/ power mechanism, rather digital devices such as “antenna farms, spy satellites, cable traffic intercepts” collect and record an immense amount of information about individuals without going any classification. “The Panspectron does not merely select certain bodies and certain (visual) data about them. Rather, it compiles information about all at the same time, using computers to select the segments of data relevant to its surveillance tasks” (DeLanda 1991: 206). As Kullenberg (2008) argues, the panspectron that was used as a war technology is now situated in everyday life and monitor ordinary citizens. He notices the interconnectivity of networks in today’s world is a crucial part of panspectric surveillance by means of the collection of an increasing amount of personal data based on our daily activities. As he notices, digitalization “reconfigures and prolongs the range of surveillance” (2008: 38).

The leveling up of the centralized state power during the neoliberal transformation of Turkey under the regime of AKP consequently intensified the surveillance mechanisms. As Çavlin Bozbeyoğlu notes, the identification system based on ID cards has already been in use from the 1920s as the primary document of
a legal citizenship of the Turkish state (2011: 65). A unique identification number for each Turkish citizen has been added to this system in 2000 that is followed by the establishments of MERNIS (The Central Civil Registration System), the National Address database, and the address based registration in 2006-2007 (Çavlin Bozbeyoğlu 2011: 65). All these transformations centralize state power as well as consolidating state surveillance. As Kullenberg notes, the interconnectivity of digital databases enable the state to monitor and track not only administrative tasks but also the daily life activities of citizens.

In the process of the purge following the failed coup attempt, the state started to conduct large-scale investigations including searching bank accounts and phone applications to determine the individuals affiliated with Fethullah Gulen’s organization. During this process, doctors, academicians, teachers and many public officers have been dismissed and prosecuted with the evidence of having a bank account from Bank Asya, alleged with Gulen’s organization. “It was only TL 1,478 ($481) that I deposited in Bank Asya when I was pregnant, and I kept it there for only two months. I think this is the reason for my dismissal. However, it was a legal bank permitted by the government at that time,” one of the dismissed teachers said (Takan 2016). As a side note, although the government seized Bank Asya in May 2015, there is no given court decision yet (Turkey purge 2017).

As Hansen notices in her article in the New York Times, the evidence that links you to a terrorist organization is not limited to a bank account, she writes:

> At present, several pieces of evidence can suggest that you may be a member of FETO, including having had an account at Bank Asya, which was founded by Gulenists; running the ByLock encrypted communication app on your phone (thought to have facilitated planning for the coup attempt); possessing those F-series dollar bills; sending your children to a school associated with Gulen; working at a Gulen-affiliated institution (a university, say, or a hospital); having subscribed to the Gulen newspaper Zaman; or having Gulen’s books in your house. (Hansen 2017)

Istar Gozaydın, another academician, one of the founding members of Helsinki Citizen’s Assembly, was also arrested due to an alleged link to the FETO/PDY terrorist organization. Gozaydın was working at one of the closed universities (alleged to be Gulen-affiliated) and she was accused of having an affiliation with the terrorist organization on the basis of her social media posts against the death penalty, capital violence and punishment (BIA News Desk 2016b). These examples are significant to understand how panspectric surveillance enlarges the scope of surveillance while showing how daily life activities such as opening a bank account can be turned into illegal crimes in the state of emergency in Turkey.

The multiplication of sensors/gazes in the panspectric surveillance decentralizes the panoptic gaze with the capacity to monitor and control the subject in every aspect. Right now in Turkey, not only state mechanisms but also individuals use digital devices as monitoring mechanisms of state power or even they themselves function as the monitoring and control mechanisms of the state. On June 2016, Zeynep Sayın Balıkçıoğlu, an academician from Bilgi University was fired from her job at Bilgi University because of insulting the Turkish president in her lectures. The evidence for this accusation was an audio record of a student that was later published in the pro-government newspaper Sabah (BIA News Desk 2016a).

The uses of bank accounts, audio records, social media accounts as evidence first show how these apparatuses are considered as the extensions of individuals. Further, as DeLanda and Kullenberg note, digital devices extends the range of surveillance along with the incredible amount of information they collect and record.
The State of Emergency: The State of Exception and Bare Life

The most deteriorating consequence of the state surveillance going on in Turkey is neither the suspensions of the academicians, nor the temporary or prolonging detentions and prosecutions, but ‘bare life’ conditions that are exposed to these people. As it is widely argued, these people are subjected to civil death (Cemal 2017). All these practices, detentions, dismissals and stigmatization of these people as terrorists not only inhibit them from working but also exclude them from civil society at all.

Although the legitimacy of all these dismissals is not a topic of this article, the examples stated above are a clear sign of the suspension of the juridical system. In other words, the state of emergency in Turkey turns into a form of state of exception.

As Agamben notes, the suspension of the rule operates in the state of exception through exclusion. “The exception is a kind of exclusion… what is excluded in the exception maintains itself in relation to the rule in the form of the rule’s suspension” (1995: 13). In the case of Turkey, the exclusion of these people from professional life is followed by the exclusion from the social life. Per state rules, the individuals who are dismissed from their jobs with the statutory decrees are banned from any job in public or state departments. The dismissed academicians cannot find either academic or nonacademic jobs, they cannot benefit from their personal rights, or even flee from the country due to the seizure of their passports. The stigmatization affects the entire lives of these people. Because of the political pressures the private sector is also reluctant to hire them. And the daily lives of the individuals and their families or relatives are also negatively affected through the stigmatization as they are excluded from civil society.

Although the purge beginning with the coup attempt mostly influences the educational institutions, it is not peculiar to academy or education in general. Right after the constitutional referendum, despite the debates about the legitimacy of the results, the state of emergency was extended for three months for the third time. Another purge in the police department follows this extension. All these massive dismissals, detentions indicate how the state of exception becomes effective in every realm of society. The extension and the long-term operation of state of emergency normalizes the state of exception as well as intensifying the polarization of society. These people are pushed to the margins of political society, they cannot find jobs, they cannot benefit their social rights, they cannot leave the country; in other words, they are confined to a prison without bars where they are also deprived of their rights as a citizen.

The universities or in general the production of knowledge is a crucial apparatus which have always been critical for the imposition of state ideologies. In this sense, the apparatuses are the governing technologies and an effective way of management and control. So, the oppositional views especially increasing in the universities, in the educational institutions in Turkey are not surprisingly considered as a threat to state power. The punishment of oppositional voices is the violation of the right of free speech in the simplest term.

The dismissals and state practices stated above can be read as authoritarianism rather than proper functioning of the juridical system. With the last referendum for presidential elections, half of the society show their discomfort of the authoritarianism going on in the country, however, the suppression of all dissident voices is continuing without slowing down in pace. From this perspective, the authoritarian turn in Turkey is rapidly developing and can easily reach the point of no return.
References