

The logo for 'Beehive Middle East Social Media' features the word 'Beehive' in a stylized font. The 'B' is large and red, while 'eehive' is in teal. A blue orbital path with three dots circles the 'ee'. Below 'Beehive' is the text 'Middle East Social Media' in teal. To the right is the logo for the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies (MDC) at Tel Aviv University, which includes a stylized building icon and the text 'TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY' and 'The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies'.

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**Boğaziçi University Demonstrations: Will Erdoğan be Able to
Blow the Secular Bubble of Istanbul?**

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During the last month, Turkish social media were busy with the mass protests that took place at the Boğaziçi University campus in Istanbul following the appointment of Prof. Melih Bulu, a close associate of President Erdoğan's, to the post of rector of Boğaziçi. These protests occurred in the shadow of the public debate on the possibility of early elections and President Erdoğan's recent statement regarding the need for a new constitution to replace the one currently in vigor – which was adopted in 1982 by the military junta that took power two years earlier. Boğaziçi University is considered among the most important educational institutions in Turkey and it is also known as one of the last secular bubbles of Istanbul.

These protests took place on January 2, 2021, but everything had in fact started in 2016. Similar to today, also then President Erdoğan did not recognize Boğaziçi

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University Senate elections' results. With the power conferred by the controversial 1982 constitution, he appointed Prof. Mehmed Özkan to the post in November 2016, *i.e.* after the failed coup attempt that took place the same year on July 15.¹ In other words, due to the high tension in the Turkish street, no one could oppose the decision.

Therefore, Prof. Özkan's nomination as the rector was considered by the students and the lecturers as a political intrusion by Erdoğan into the university's affairs as well as a sort of limitation of academic freedom. In their perspective, the current situation of the rival Marmara University constitutes a warning sign. Last October, Marmara University officials declared the university's relocation to a new campus, named after the Turkish president in Istanbul's Maltepe district.²

The students launched social media campaigns and took to the streets, also posting videos and updates from the field especially with the new Clubhouse app, which successfully attracted the attention of the public.



Instead of letting the students demonstrate, the police dispersed the crowd and even handcuffed the main gate of the university in order to impede the students from entering the campus. Consequently, pictures showing the gate of the university being handcuffed became viral, symbolizing the limitation of academic freedom in Turkey.³

During the protests, the police did not take participants under custody, but, later the same day, it raided their homes, and they were taken to the police stations. A statement by the police accused the Marxist radical left terror organization named

¹ ["Melih Bulu: Boğaziçi Üniversitesi'ne rektör olarak atanan Bulu, ilk açıklamasında 'Unutmayalım ki aynı gemideyiz' dedi,"](#) *BBC Türkçe*, 3 January 2021; accessed 2 February 2021.

² ["Marmara Üniversitesi, 2023'te Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Külliyesi'ne taşınacak,"](#) *Bir Gün*, 13 October 2020; accessed 2 February 2020.

³ [@nedentoldu](#), *Twitter*, 5 February 2021; accessed 10 February 2021.

MLKP (Marxist–Leninist Communist Party) for stirring unrest,⁴ and declared that the vast majority of the arrested were not students but MLKP terrorists.

In order to gain public support, the students formulated slogans such as “We do not want an appointed rector” and “Boğaziçi demands elections.”⁵ Lecturers also organized their own protest on campus, demanding the release of their students, who, supported by the professors, called for a strike from Zoom classes.⁶

The government did not soften its position. On contrary, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* - AKP) spokesperson Ömer Çelik sought to delegitimize the demonstrations and stressed that the president acted within the powers granted by the constitution when appointing the rector. In a public statement, the appointed rector Bulu justified the state’s constitutional right to appoint a public servant and exacerbated the students’ anger claiming that the university senate elections are not necessary.⁷

Later, Bulu decided to take part in TV interviews to win the sympathy of the public. In one such interview, he told the journalists that he likes hard rock music and especially listens to Metallica, prompting students to share cartoons with the sign of Metallica and labelling Bulu as the “puppet of Erdoğan.” The students asked him to resign.

⁴ “[Boğaziçi Üniversitesi'nde polisler saldıranlar MLKP'li çıktı](#),” *Star*, 5 January 2021; accessed 10 February 2021.

⁵ [#boğaziçirektörseçimiistiyor; #kayyumrektöristemiyoruz](#).

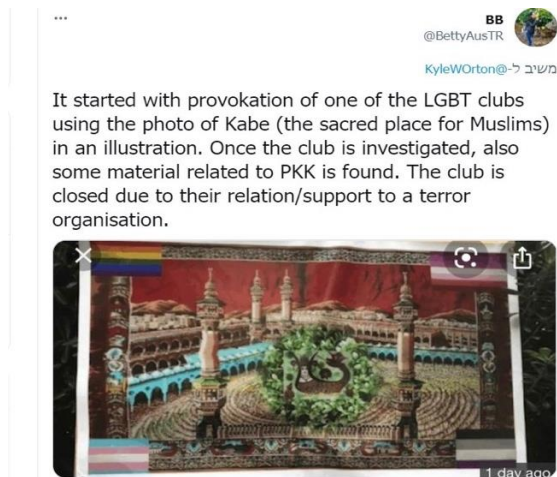
⁶ “[Boğaziçi Üniversitesi'ne Melih Bulu'nun kayyum rektör olarak atanması](#),” *Facebook*, 6 January 2021; accessed 10 February 2021.

⁷ “[Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Rektörü Prof. Dr. Melih Bulu: Niye istifa edeyim?](#)” *BBC Türkçe*, 6 January 2021; accessed 2 February 2021.



Satirical picture with the wording “Rector of puppets.”⁸

After some days of calm, on January 6 the protests resumed, despite the ban issued by the governor of Istanbul. Some of the students carried LGBT flags and clashed with police. The situation aggravated when a picture of the Kaaba, the holiest site in Islam, surrounded by LGBT flags was seen on a billboard outside of the university. The picture also circulated online, causing tension between the LGBT and the Islamist camps.⁹



The picture of the Kaaba surrounded by LGBT flags.¹⁰

⁸ [@ozkankormas](#), *Twitter*, 5 January 2021; last accessed 23 February 2021.

⁹ [“Turkish Gov’t Uses Protests at Boğaziçi University to Attack LGBT Rights with Islamist Discourse,”](#) *Duvar English*, 31 January 2021; accessed 2 February 2021.

¹⁰ [@BettyAusTR](#), *Twitter*, 4 February 2021.

Turkey's Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu seized the opportunity and instructed the police to raid the LGBT club inside the university.¹¹ Later, the club was shut down by the decision of the appointed rector Bulu.¹² Protesting against the LGBT Kaaba picture, the conservative and Islamist SNS (Social networking service) users launched new hashtag slogans, such as “We will defend Kaaba” and “I am standing with my state;”¹³ moreover, the conservative students of Istanbul University organized a counter demonstration, which was not dispersed by the police. As a result, Boğaziçi students launched a counter advocacy campaign through hashtags like “LGBT rights are human rights.”

The tension between the parties reached to a new high when Interior Minister Soylu posted the tweet: “4 LGBT heretics who disrespected the Kaaba were arrested,” which profoundly shocked the LGBT community and the Boğaziçi students.¹⁴ The Twitter company labeled the post as “hate speech,” while the theology department students of Boğaziçi University supported Soylu. These divisions mirror the polarization within the Turkish society.

At the end of January, tensions again increased after the publication of a video that showed a policeman shouting at the crowd and asking them to look down while walking in the vicinity of Boğaziçi campus.¹⁵ The SNS users condemned the police and the hashtag “We will not look down” became viral.¹⁶ Many SNS users began to share the well-known picture of founder of the republic Mustafa Kemal Atatürk looking to the sky together with his famous byword “The future lies in the skies.”¹⁷ This act clearly highlighted the rift between the secular and the conservative camps in the Turkish society.

¹¹ “[Boğaziçi gözaltıları özel güvenliğin ihbarıyla başladı](#),” *Cumhuriyet*, 30 January 2021; accessed 10 February 2021.

¹² “[Boğaziçi Üniversitesi'ndeki LGBTİ Kulübü Kapatıldı](#),” *Onedio*, 2 February 2021; accessed 10 February 2021.

¹³ [#KabeyiSavunacağız](#); [#DevletiminYanımdayım](#); [#AsımınNesliMeydanlarda](#); [#KabeyiSavunanFisleniyor](#); [#KabeKutsalımızdır](#).

¹⁴ “[Boğaziçi'ndeki 'Kabe figürlü LGBTİ + bayraklı görsel'den dört öğrenciye gözaltı](#),” *Diken*, 30 January 2021; accessed 2 February 2021.

¹⁵ [@YolTV](#), *Twitter*, 2 February 2021; accessed 2 February 2020.

¹⁶ [#WeWillnotlookdown](#).

¹⁷ [#Aşağıyabakmayacağız](#); [#boğaziçiablukada](#). [@odtudpuit](#), *Twitter*, 3 February 2021; accessed 10 February 2021.

In conclusion, the public discourse on the Boğaziçi protests in the social media revealed once again the mutual animosity and deep polarization of the secular and conservative camps in Turkish society. While the Turkish state acts as the “defender of the Kaaba from the LGBT heretics,” it would be impossible for it to undo its actions and withdraw. In light of this, it seems that Erdoğan once again will not compromise and will blow one of the last bubbles of the secular Istanbul.

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