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# Turkish government accused of hijacking boosted science budget

**Tamara Grüner, Munich**

The government of Turkey is wresting control of the country's main research council for political ends. That's the accusation of prominent Turkish scientists who fear that recent appointments and legal changes are attempts to channel a growing science budget towards the government's supporters.

This week, parliament is considering the government's second attempt to increase its control over TÜBITAK, Turkey's main science funding body. The government made its first attempt in 2003, but the law it forced through was later overturned by the country's highest court.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan recently tripled the council's budget to \$300 million, as part of Turkey's negotiations for membership of the European Union. But it is clear that he would like more control over how the money is spent.

TÜBITAK, set up in 1963 as an independent organization, has an executive board that elects new members, who are then appointed by the prime minister. The board also elects a president, who must be endorsed by the president of the republic, currently Ahmet Necdet Sezer.

The trouble started in 2003, when Erdogan refused to endorse the appointment of six new TÜBITAK board members. He also refused to pass on to Sezer the board's recommendation that its president, physicist Namik Kemal Pak, should be appointed for a second term. The right-leaning Erdogan and the more left-wing Sezer clashed over the issue and the government quickly passed a law allowing it to appoint unelected members and to name the board's president.

It then appointed six members and an acting president, engineer Nuket Yetis of Marmara University in Istanbul. The new arrivals were not welcome: four vice-presidents resigned, saying that TÜBITAK had been "taken under political control". And several scientists complained that the new board members were not sufficiently qualified.

The main opposition party challenged the law in the Supreme Constitutional Court, and won in January last year. But Pak and several colleagues are still involved in legal battles to

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REASONS

Prime Minister Erdogan has poured money into Turkish science, but may have jeopardized its autonomy.

get Erdogan's appointments annulled. Pak accuses the government of sacrificing TÜBITAK's scientific independence: "It changed the law to stop my return," he says.

Turkey's scientific community has been left in disarray. Several directors of research institutes have resigned or been dismissed, including Naci Görür, the director of the main research facility operated by TÜBITAK, the Marmara Research Centre. They have been replaced by government appointees.

## Legal confusion

With the rejection of the 2003 law, TÜBITAK's legal status has become unclear. Some TÜBITAK-funded researchers have already been excluded from international projects after collaborators were advised by lawyers not to get involved, according to Celal Sengor, a geologist at Istanbul Technical University who currently holds the international chair of the Collège de France. "What has happened to TÜBITAK is a scandal of unprecedented proportion and an affront to science," he says.

To resolve the body's status, the government needs to change the law. Last week, it proposed a law that would divide control of board appointments equally between the government and independent organizations.

In many countries, including the United

States, governments appoint the officials who run the institutes that distribute public science funding. But decisions about where the money goes are generally supported by a robust system of peer review.

Many scientists in Turkey fear the new law will mean that projects get funding because of political considerations rather than scientific merit. "This would mean the end of independent scientific research," says Sengor.

But Ömer Anlagan, a vice-president of TÜBITAK and a mechanical engineer at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, denies that TÜBITAK's autonomy is under threat: "On the contrary, it will be much better." He argues that the government's moves were necessary to get rid of cronyism. "The old board members always selected the same people." He also denies that the new board members are underqualified. "Some of them are from top universities," he says.

Board member Abdullah Atalar, an electrical engineer from the University of Bilkent, is enthusiastic about TÜBITAK funding. "We have given 200 young scientists annual grants of \$100,000," he says. "That has never happened before in TÜBITAK's history." But fellow member Sevkettin Ruacan is uneasy: "It is not certain what the criteria for support were."

A decision on the proposed law is expected in the next fortnight. ■