

21 May 2019

## **Turkey: METU University Rectorate unlawfully bans LGBTI+ March**

On 10 May 2019, the police, invited by the Rectorate of the Middle East Technical University (METU), in Ankara, used pepper spray, plastic bullets and tear gas against students participating in a peaceful LGBTI+ Pride March taking place inside the campus. Twenty-one students and an academic were taken into police custody and released late at night.

The [METU LGBTI+ Solidarity](#) is a student group established in 1996, working to secure gender equality, eradicate the on-campus LGBTI+ phobia, and ensure that the university is a safe space for LGBTI+ people. In recent years, the Rectorate has been blocking the organisation of student events concerning LGBTI+ issues, including by cutting electricity, inviting the security forces to the campus or opening administrative investigations against the organisers. Despite that, every May since 2011, the METU LGBTI+ Solidarity has organised Pride Marches on campus.

In November 2017, under the state of emergency, a blanket indefinite ban on public events focused on LGBTI+ issues was issued in Ankara. Despite the end of emergency rule in July 2018, the Ankara governor's office did not lift the ban. On the contrary, on 3 October 2018, the governor's office informed law enforcement and other relevant authorities about a new ban, without giving any indication of when it would end.

On 19 April 2019, an Ankara administrative Appeals Court lifted the ban introduced under the state of emergency, on the grounds that it was unlawful and restricted rights and freedoms in unconditional, vague, and disproportionate ways. The court underlined the state's duty to take security measures to protect peaceful assemblies and events, instead of banning them. Although the legal proceedings against the second ban remain ongoing, the court's decision to lift the ban imposed under the state of emergency shows that the new ban issued on the same grounds is also manifestly unlawful.

A few days prior to planned METU Pride March, on 6 May 2019 the university rector sent an e-mail to all students, graduates, and academics of METU, claiming that the Pride March was being organised by "various non-governmental organisations", and informing them that the Rectorate would not allow for the event to be held. Further, the rector pointed to the ban on LGBTI+ events in Ankara and warned the students that the Rectorate would ask the Ankara police to intervene if the event took place. As reported by the students, the rector ignored their repeated requests for a meeting in order to find common grounds.

The METU LGBTI+ Solidarity announced on Twitter that the Pride March would be held no matter what. The LGBTIQ+ Rights Centre of the Ankara Bar Association applied to the Ankara 7<sup>th</sup> Administrative Court on behalf of the students and requested the suspension of the Rectorate's decision. The Court rejected this request due to the statement by the Rectorate that no official administrative decision banning the event had been made and that the Rectorate had only shared their security concerns regarding the March. However, while in custody, the students were told that they had been detained for violating the ban of the Rectorate.

On 10 May 2019, several hours before the planned start of the march, a group of students and some academics started gathering on the campus to prepare for the event. The police invited by the Rectorate responded promptly using pepper spray, plastic bullets and tear gas against the Pride participants. The police continued dispersing the students in different parts of the campus

until late afternoon. One student was shot in the head with a plastic bullet. [Videos showing the police violence during the event](#) were shared on the web on the same day.

The students also reported that many police officers were taking videos of them. According to the participants, during the event, there were many police officers in plain clothes on the campus. Twenty-one students and an academic from the university were taken into police custody for shouting slogans, carrying rainbow flags and taking pictures of the police intervention. They were all released late at night.

On 13 May 2019, the students held a symbolic “farewell ceremony” for the rector to demonstrate that they no longer recognised his authority. On 14 May 2019, many students did not attend classes to protest the violence against the Pride March. So far, no legal action has been taken against the police officers who used violence.

Front Line Defenders condemns the violation of the students’ right to freedom of assembly by the METU Rectorate, based on an unlawful ban on LGBTI+ events. Front Line Defenders believes that the students are being targeted solely as a result of exercising their fundamental rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, guaranteed under domestic and international law. Front Line Defenders is further concerned about the ongoing criminalisation and marginalisation of LGBTI+ rights defenders in Turkey, as well as the use of violence by the police against those exercising their right to freedom of assembly.

We call on the Turkish authorities to carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the police brutality during the event, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards. We further call on the Turkish authorities to guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Turkey are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.