

30 April 2021

Turkey: Human rights defender Sergen Kahraman Çotak physically assaulted and threatened by police officers

On 20 April 2021, human rights defender **Sergen Kahraman Çotak**, was physically assaulted and threatened by police officers at the Armutlu FSM police station in Istanbul, whilst attempting to report to the police station in accordance with the judiciary measure imposed on him on 3 February 2021. The human rights defender was among 51 students detained on 1 February 2021 at the Boğaziçi University campus during peaceful protests, organised in response to the new government-appointed university rector and in defence of academic freedom.

[Sergen Kahraman Çotak](#) is a human rights defender, working on LGBTIQ+ rights, specifically working on university campuses to eliminate homophobia, transphobia, and sexism. He is a Molecular Biology and Genetics student at Boğaziçi University and is also a member of the recently banned LGBTIQ+ student club in the university. Police searched and raided the club on 30 January 2021, and the following day, the club was officially banned by the rector. Sergen Kahraman Çotak was actively involved in the protests organised in response to the appointment of a new rector to the university by a presidential decree on 2 January 2021. The new rector had not been working at the University prior to his appointment.

On the evening of 20 April 2021, Sergen Kahraman Çotak went to the Armutlu Fatih Sultan Mehmet (Armutlu FSM) police station, accompanied by a friend, to present himself in accordance with a judiciary measure issued against him, following his arrest during the protests at the Boğaziçi University campus on 1 February 2021. As the human rights defender was entering the building, a police officer from the special operations unit grabbed his backpack and pushed him, telling him he must leave his bag at the entrance. Sergen Kahraman Çotak, who was informed he was a COVID-19 close contact, reminded the unmasked police officer of social distancing and asked him not to touch him and to keep his distance. When Sergen Kahraman Çotak went to leave his bag at the entrance as instructed, the police officer followed him and started physically assaulting and insulting him, saying “who do you think you are”.

Another special operations officer approached Sergen Kahraman Çotak and hit him with the butt of his rifle. Soon after this, about four or five unmasked police officers surrounded the human rights defender, pushing and shoving him and insulting him. One of the officers slapped Sergen Kahraman Çotak in the face, and when his friend attempted to intervene and de-escalate the situation, he was reportedly warned by an officer who said that “no one slapped anyone here”. The police chief further threatened Sergen Kahraman Çotak that he may be subjected to a strip search. The same police chief had threatened Sergen Kahraman Çotak a month prior when he was reporting to the station, reportedly saying “This is the anti-terrorism department. We shoot you and no one will even know.”

When the human rights defender reminded the police that the incident had been recorded by the CCTV cameras, the police officers tried to forcibly escort him out of the station. Sergen Kahraman Çotak said he had to sign the attendance form however, and he was permitted to do so before he and his friend were forced out of the police station amid verbal threats, insults and intimidation from the officers. Following the incident, the human rights defender saw a physician who certified in a medical report that Sergen Kahraman Çotak had been physically assaulted.

On 1 February 2021, police officers entered the Boğaziçi University campus and physically assaulted a group of students demonstrating in front of the rector’s office and calling for the release

of friends who were detained and arrested for their participation in the protests, which have been ongoing since January 2021. The police attacked the group without any prior warning and forcibly detained 51 students and human rights defenders, including Sergen Kahraman Çotak. The human rights defender was among the students who were badly beaten during the arrest. The group was taken to the Istanbul Police Headquarters along with another 108 people who had participated in the demonstration and had been detained earlier the same day while they attempted to make a press statement in front of the university.

On 3 February 2021, after spending two days in detention, Sergen Kahraman Çotak and five other student human rights defenders were transferred to the Istanbul 2nd Criminal Judgeship of Peace with an arrest order, on allegations of “depriving a person of his liberty” and “joining an unarmed unauthorised demonstration and refusing to disperse”. The judge ordered the release of the detained human rights defenders on the condition of a travel ban, and that they report to the nearest police station on a weekly basis. No time limit was set for the travel ban and reporting requirements.

The protests at Boğaziçi University initially began on 4 January 2021 when hundreds of students, including human rights defenders, gathered outside the entrance of the university campus to oppose the appointment of a new rector by presidential decree, and his affiliation to the governing Ak Parti. Students from Boğaziçi University regarded this appointment as a violation of “academic freedom and scientific autonomy, as well as the democratic values” of the university and demanded his resignation. Since the protests first began, police have frequently used excessive force to disperse the demonstrations and at least 600 people including students, human rights defenders and other supporters have been detained for their participation. It is reported that 10 protesters have been arrested and administrative measures brought against more than 50 human rights defenders, including house arrests, travel bans and reporting to a police station on a weekly basis.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned by the reports of ill treatment of human rights defender Sergen Kahraman Çotak, and more broadly the ill treatment of other human rights defenders and students participating in the protests at Boğaziçi University. Human rights defenders and students participating in the demonstrations have reportedly been subjected to forced naked searches, sexual harassment and threats by the police, particularly LGBTIQ+ rights defenders who have been detained, as well as physical assaults and excessive use of force by police, and the use of tear gas and plastic bullets when attempting to disperse the protests. Front Line Defenders condemns this ill-treatment and harassment of human rights defenders in reprisal for exercising their right to freedom of assembly, advocating against corruption and promoting academic freedom.

Front line Defenders calls on the authorities in Turkey to:

1. Initiate an impartial and thorough investigation on the allegations of ill treatment of Sergen Kahraman Çotak at Armutlu Fatih Sultan Mehmet police station and bring the perpetrators to justice under international fair trial standards;
2. Investigate all allegations of ill treatment of protestors who were detained during protests and ensure that the responsible police officers are held accountable;
3. Drop charges against Sergen Kahraman Çotak and all other human rights defenders who peacefully used their right to assembly and expression since the beginning of Boğaziçi University protests and lift all judicial measures imposed against the defenders;
4. Guarantee that all human rights defenders in Turkey are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free from all restrictions, including judicial harassment and ill treatment.