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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Hermeneutic Analysis of Erdoğanism Theopolitical Doctorine in Turkish Higher Education: The Engineering of Behavior and Cognitive Thought

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ABSTRACT

Since the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) ascension in 2002, Türkiye's higher education governance has undergone a profound transformation, recalibrating the intersections of knowledge, national identity, and religious values within a broader project of Erdoğanism civilizational doctrine. The main research question is: How are Erdoğan's theopolitical policies represented in policy documents, institutional reforms, or official speeches, and how do these representations lead to changes in patterns of understanding, epistemic value systems, and academic behavior. Relying on "Gadame hermeneutics," the concept of "theopolitics," and "Governmental Rationality," this study considers the governance of higher education as a meaning-making process through which epistemic and ethical norms are redefined.Through a qualitative hermeneutic discourse analysis of policy texts, official rhetoric, and institutional reforms related to the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) from 2002 to 2025, the study identifies four primary mechanisms: the reconstruction of the "ideal student" as a moral-civilizational subject; the centralization of rector appointments to maintain interpretive control; the prioritization of "civilizational truth" in epistemic restructuring; and the emergence of an "atmospheric governance" that normalizes loyalty, overt religiosity, and discursive caution. These mechanisms culminate in a form of "cognitive governance" that aligns internal thought with institutional compliance, fostering a "civilizational habitus" and "civilizational pedagogy" that, while bolstering ideological cohesion, creates inherent tensions with the demands of scientific innovation and critical inquiry.

KEYWORDS

Theopolitics, Erdoğanism, Higher Education, Behavioral Engineering.

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Introduction

Since the AKP's rise to power in 2002, higher education has become a central arena in Turkey's struggle over modernity, national identity, and the definition of legitimate knowledge (Çelik & Gür, 2014; Kaplan, 2006). Universities that once embodied republican secularism have been reframed as civilizational institutions tasked with cultivating morally disciplined and nationally loyal citizens (İnal, 2012; Gülalp, 2019). This shift is frequently interpreted through the lens of "Erdoğanism," a political-cultural project blending national history, religious morality, and political authority (Duran, 2013; Mutluer, 2019). Existing scholarship highlights authoritarian consolidation, shrinking academic freedom, and administrative centralization (Aydın, 2019; Gülmez, 2018; Bozkurt et al., 2020), yet less attention has been given to how governance functions interpretively—constructing meaning, shaping academic subjectivity, and reorganizing epistemic norms (Ricoeur, 1991; Gadamer, 2004). A hermeneutic perspective views policy texts and speeches as interpretive acts that delimit what can be known or questioned within institutions (Gadamer, 2004; Ricoeur, 1991). From this viewpoint, AKP reforms reflect not only administrative restructuring but also a transformation of the interpretive horizon linking knowledge, morality, and national belonging (İnal, 2018; Erol, 2022). The discourse of raising a "pious generation" embeds education in a project of ethical cultivation and political socialization (Türkmen, 2012; İnal, 2012). Theopolitics helps explain how religious symbolism and moral narratives legitimize political authority in governing universities (Asad, 2003; Agamben, 2011; Mutluer, 2019). Combined with the governmental rationality described by Foucault and Dean (Foucault, 2008; Dean, 2010), higher-education governance emerges as a process shaping conduct indirectly through norms, incentives, and institutional arrangements (Rose, 1999; Bourdieu, 2000).

Methodology

This study employs qualitative hermeneutic discourse analysis to investigate how theopolitical meanings are constructed, circulated, and institutionalized in Turkish higher-education governance from 2002 to 2025 (Gadamer, 2004; Ricoeur, 1991). Data sources include YÖK regulations, legal reforms, policy documents, appointment procedures, and speeches that emphasize national and moral values (Tekneci, 2019; Gümüş, 2018; Gür, 2016). These texts function as interpretive artifacts articulating state expectations on the purpose of universities, legitimate knowledge, and acceptable academic behavior (Kaplan, 2006; İnal, 2018). The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, recurrent concepts such as "civilization," "national will," "pious generation," and "native and national" are mapped for their semantic functions (Duran, 2013; Yılmaz, 2018). Second, the discourse is contextualized within Turkey's historical tensions around secularism, nationalism, and religious identity (Kuru, 2009; Öktem, 2011). Third, cognitive-behavioral interpretation assesses how meanings translate into expectations for conduct, compliance, and epistemic boundaries, drawing on theories of governmentality and subject formation (Dean, 2010; Foucault, 2008; Rose, 1999; Bourdieu, 2000). The method reconstructs the interpretive logic—the rationality of governance—through which cognitive frameworks and behavioral norms become aligned.

Results

1. Reconstruction of the "ideal student"

The AKP reframes higher education as cultivating morally disciplined, nationally loyal, and religiously sensitive individuals (İnal, 2012; Türkmen, 2012). The "pious generation"

discourse links academic success to moral virtue, elevating tradition and conservatism over secular critical inquiry (İnal, 2018; Gülalp, 2019).

2. Interpretive control through centralized appointments

Centralization of rector appointments transforms universities into extensions of executive authority (Tekneci, 2019; Çelik & Gür, 2014). Post-2016 purges intensified caution, self-censorship, and compliance (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Özkırımlı, 2018), shaping interpretive horizons and permissible research (Gülmez, 2018).

3. Epistemic reordering through "civilizational truth"

A hierarchical epistemic landscape privileges Islamic-Ottoman or civilizational perspectives while portraying certain Western theories as alien (Erol, 2022; Yılmaz & Morieson, 2023). Knowledge becomes moralized, shaping disciplinary hierarchies and narrowing epistemic diversity (Gümüş, 2018; Gür, 2016).

4. Atmospheric governance and symbolic environments

Symbolic environments and ceremonies normalize loyalty, religiosity, and discursive caution (Rose, 1999; Özkırımlı, 2018). After 2016, intensified self-monitoring produced a civilizational habitus where conformity appears natural (Bourdieu, 2000), shaping both cognition and behavior. Collectively, these mechanisms constitute a model of cognitive governance aligning academic subjectivity with a broader theopolitical civilizational project (Mutluer, 2019; Yılmaz, 2018).

Discussion and conclusion

The findings indicate that higher-education governance under Erdoğanism functions as a hermeneutic-theopolitical project aligning cognition and conduct with a civilizational narrative (Mutluer, 2019; Yılmaz, 2018). Meaning-making, centralization, epistemic reordering, and atmospheric governance transform universities into sites for producing a "civilizational subject" (Erol, 2022; İnal, 2018). While this enhances ideological coherence, it reduces pluralism, narrows epistemic horizons, and constrains critical inquiry (Aydın, 2019; Gülmez, 2018). Over time, such governance risks scientific stagnation and international isolation (Nussbaum, 2010; Gür, 2016). This study contributes to the sociology of knowledge by showing how modern states shape subjectivity through symbolic and epistemic structures rather than coercion alone (Foucault, 2008; Rose, 1999). Future research should explore how students and faculty negotiate, internalize, or resist these frameworks (Bourdieu, 2000).

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Authors' Contribution

The sole author was responsible for the study's conceptualization, methodology, data collection, analysis, writing, and final approval of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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