

Turkey censors evolution

Turkey's government has done more for science than many. A row over a censored magazine and a sacked editor could put the good work at risk.

It has been the biggest crisis in Turkish academia since last year's lifting of the headscarf ban in universities. Last week a portrait of Charles Darwin was taken off the cover of the March issue of the government-backed science magazine *Bilim ve Teknik* (*Science and Technology*) just before it went to press. TÜBİTAK, Turkey's national science funding agency, which publishes the magazine, then sacked its editor, Çiğdem Atakuman. Scientists, assuming censorship, are justifiably outraged and protests are ongoing.

Science minister Mehmet Aydın, a historian of philosophy and religion, expressed discomfort at the cover's removal — but also fanned the flames by commenting: "What kind of a fight can we have with Darwin? The guy is already dead." He made matters worse by later adding: "[TÜBİTAK] is supposed to reflect the views of all those who have served science, no matter how mistaken they can be."

TÜBİTAK vice-president Ömer Cebeci, who sits on the magazine's editorial board, pulled the plug on Darwin. He denied censorship, charging that Atakuman had secretly changed an issue intended to cover global warming. Not true, says Atakuman, who says Cebeci told her that the Darwin cover was a "provocation" at a time of imminent local elections. One editorial-board member of *Bilim ve Teknik* has resigned in protest at what he, at least, considers censorship.

This row has brought into focus two issues that plague Turkish science. One is political interference in the scientific civil service; the other is high levels of public support for creationism.

In Turkey, as in many countries, the civil service is expected to mirror the ruling party's ideology. So, although they are keen funders of research, most senior government officials, in common with most of the population, do not believe in evolution by natural selection. The education minister Hüseyin Çelik, for example, has proclaimed his belief in intelligent design. Yet Turkey is one of three current

candidates for membership of the European Union (EU). Ankara and Istanbul house the largest overseas missions of the European Commission, whose officials are monitoring all aspects of Turkish public life and constantly advising on what needs to be done to harmonize laws and practices with those in the EU.

Science and technology was one of the first 'chapters' that the EU said it was satisfied with and that, provisionally, did not require further reform. Officials will now almost certainly be alarmed to see the extent of political interference in TÜBİTAK.

Only last week, the European Parliament issued a report stating that Turkey needed to make much faster progress in areas such as censorship. European officials will see this latest episode as evidence that the country has some way to go on that score.

TÜBİTAK needs to initiate a transparent investigation into the *Bilim ve Teknik* affair. The organization should also consider making an unambiguous statement of its position on evolution, intelligent design and creationism to reconfirm its credentials as a serious scientific body. In the past, TÜBİTAK has provided reliable information on Darwin's theory in a country where creation is offered as an alternative to evolution in high-school biology teaching. The agency could do that again. After all, none of the world's religions commands its believers to be creationists. Many Islamic scholars and thinkers have speculated on the origins of life.

Turkey's ruling party must learn from this latest affair. It must keep religion out of science policy, and be seen to be doing so. ■

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Health highway

President Obama's funds for electronic health records should prompt research — and controversy.

One of the most striking, if little noted, aspects of the recent US stimulus bill is that 53 of its 407 pages are devoted to setting up the administrative framework for a national system of electronic health records (EHRs). At the head of this framework, which encompasses committees on standards, policy and much else, will be a National Coordinator for Health Information Technology, located within the Department of Health and Human Services.

Many will find it even more remarkable that this portion of the stimulus bill builds upon foundations laid by former president George W. Bush, who established the office of the national coordinator by

executive order in 2004, and set him the goal of giving every American access to EHRs by 2014. Now, with the stimulus bill, Congress and the Obama administration have not only embraced that goal, but have allocated \$19 billion to help reach it.

Better still, from the research perspective, the stimulus bill explicitly envisions scientists being able to use these clinical records for a wide variety of population studies — monitoring the spread of flu, tuberculosis and other diseases, for example, or spotting people who might be good candidates for clinical trials, or looking for signs of adverse reactions after a drug has been released on the market (see page 278).

Many researchers believe that such studies could ultimately produce benefits as least as big as the effects of electronic records on clinical care — but only if some major issues about data access get resolved first.