



THE REFLECTION OF ANTI-IMMIGRANT SENTIMENTS ON AFRICAN STUDENTS IN TURKEY: AN EXAMINATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

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Türkiye'de "Göçmen Karşıtlığının" Afrikalı Öğrencilere Yansıması: Sosyal Medya Paylaşımları Üzerine İnceleme Öz

Türkiye'nin Afrika'ya yönelik politikasında son yıllarda diplomatik, askeri, ekonomik ve kültürel alanlarda kapsamlı adımlar atılmıştır. Büyükelçilik ve resmi sivil kurumların yanı sıra kıtanın birçok ülkesinden Afrikalı genç gerek burslu gerekse de kendi imkanlarıyla Türkiye'de lisans ve lisansüstü eğitim almaktadır. Atılan tüm bu adımlarla 2024 itibariyle Türkiye'de eğitim alan Afrikalı öğrenci sayısı 60 bini geçmiştir. Eğitimini tamamlayan bu öğrenciler, Türkiye dış politikasında "kültür elçileri" olarak tanımlanmakta ve Türkiye'nin Afrika ülkeleriyle kurduğu ilişkilerde önemli unsurlar olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Türkiye'nin dış politikasında Afrika ülkeleriyle kurduğu olumlu ilişkilere rağmen iç politikasında yaşanan ekonomik ve siyasi çalkalanmalar, Türkiye'nin farklı şehirlerinde eğitim alan Afrikalı öğrenciler üzerinde olumsuz etkiler bırakmaktadır. Özellikle Türkiye'de zaman zaman ortaya çıkan yabancı düşmanlığı, Afrikalı öğrenciler üzerinde de hissedilmektedir. Bu durum, Afrika ülkeleriyle uzun yıllarda elde edilen kazanımların kısa sürede kaybedilmesi tehlikesini doğurmaktadır. Bu çalışmada, Türkiye'deki yabancı düşmanlığının, Türkiye'de eğitim alan Afrikalı öğrenciler üzerindeki etkisi incelenmiştir. Özellikle sosyal medya hesapları üzerinden Türkiye'deki yabancı düşmanlığına karşı Türkiye'de eğitim alan Afrikalı öğrencilerin tepkileri araştırılmıştır. Çalışma sonucu görülmüştür ki Türkiye'de yaşanan siyasi ve ekonomik çalkantılar yabancı düşmanlığına dönüştüğünde Afrikalı öğrenciler arasında Türkiye aleyhinde görüşlerin gündeme gelmesine neden olmakta ve bu durum da Türkiye'nin Afrika politikasını tehlikeye sokmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Afrika, yabancı düşmanlığı, Afrikalı öğrenci, Türk dış politikası

The Reflection of Anti-Immigrant Sentiments on African Students in Turkey: An Examination of Social Media Posts

Turkey has taken comprehensive steps towards Africa. In addition to embassies and official civil institutions, many young Africans from various countries on the continent are pursuing undergraduate and graduate education in Turkey, either through scholarships or their own means. These students who complete their education are identified as "cultural ambassadors" in Turkey's foreign policy and emerge as significant elements in Turkey's relations with African countries. Particularly, occasional instances of xenophobia in Turkey are also felt among African students. This situation poses a risk of rapidly losing the gains achieved over many years in relations with African countries. This study examines the impact of anti-immigrant in Turkey on African students studying in the country. Specifically, the reactions of African students studying in Turkey to anti-immigrant in the country, especially through their social media accounts, have been investigated. The study reveals that when the political and economic turmoil in Turkey turns into anti-immigrant, it leads to the emergence of negative views among African students against Turkey, jeopardizing Turkey's Africa policy.

Keywords: Silk Road, Globalization, Humanity, Turks, Path

Introduction

In recent years, Turkey's relations with African countries have been deepening in various fields such as diplomacy, economy, security, and culture. As of 2024, Turkey has increased its number of embassies in Africa to 44, reflecting significant diplomatic efforts across the continent's 54 countries. The number of African embassies in Ankara has risen from 10 at the beginning of 2008 to 38 today. In the realms of public diplomacy, humanitarian diplomacy, and cultural initiatives, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), the Yunus Emre Institute (YEE), and the Turkish Maarif Foundation (TMV) are raising Turkey's profile in many African countries. Turkish Airlines (THY) brings distant locations closer, while the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD), the Turkish Red Crescent, and non-governmental organizations provide humanitarian aid and development assistance. The Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEİK) and the Independent Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association (MÜSİAD) are deepening commercial ties between Turkey and African countries. Official and civil media organizations, particularly Anadolu Agency (AA), are fostering closer ties between Africa and Turkey.

With these initiatives, Turkey's trade volume with African countries reached \$37 billion in 2023, and the market value of Turkish investments in Africa exceeded \$10 billion. Turkish contracting firms have undertaken approximately 1,885 projects worth around \$87 billion across the continent. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has frequently visited African countries, making over 50 visits by 2024 (TCBB, December 12, 2024).

Another outcome of Turkey's relations with African countries is the presence of international students, commonly referred to as "guest students" or "foreign students". Africa, often highlighted as the "Continent of the Future" or "Rising Africa," stands out not only for its underground and surface resources but also for its young population. However, political instability, economic conditions, and issues within the education system in African countries lead young people to seek education outside the continent. With a population of 1.3 billion and an average age of 19, the number of young Africans opting for education abroad increased from 281,000 in 2000 to 441,000 in 2010, and to 624,000 in 2020. Among those preferring education outside Africa, Moroccans rank first, while Nigerians lead in Sub-Saharan Africa. The most preferred countries for education outside the continent are France, followed by China, the USA, Germany, the UK, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Canada, with Turkey ranking eighth (Carnegie Endowment, July 13, 2023). International students play a significant role in humanitarian diplomacy, both through the education they receive in Turkey and upon returning to their home countries after completing their studies. The number of international students receiving higher education in Turkey has reached approximately 340,000 from 198 different countries. Among these international students, the number of African students increased from 28,000 in 2020 to 61,000 in 2023 (TCBB, 2024). As President Erdoğan has noted, Turkish universities are increasingly becoming an educational hub for guest students. Furthermore, President Erdoğan has mentioned encountering ministers, businesspeople, academics, and politicians who graduated from Turkish universities, speak Turkish, and consider themselves "ambassadors of goodwill" for Turkey during his visits to Africa (TCBB, May 6, 2024).

Purpose of the Research

International students hold a significant place in Turkey's Africa policy. While African students studying in Turkey often express many positive aspects about their experiences, they also highlight certain negative situations during direct interviews. These issues, ranging from residence permit procedures to cultural adaptation, are often not openly discussed, leading to inadequate solutions. Social media posts made by African students, albeit infrequently, during periods of rising xenophobia in Turkey, provide important data for understanding their perspectives on Turkey.

Methodology of the Research

This paper examines the reflections of anti-immigrant sentiments directed towards African students on platform X, in the context of the political and economic conditions that sometimes give rise to xenophobia in Turkey. The aim here is to reveal the stance of African students, who are considered "cultural ambassadors" and play an important role in deepening Turkey's relations with African countries, when faced with discriminatory and accusatory allegations. The study focuses on social media posts made before and after the local elections on April 31. Specifically, the impact of policies towards immigrants or African students by institutions such as Karabük University, Bolu Municipality, and Afyonkarahisar Municipality on African students studying in Turkey has been investigated.

Reasons African Youth Prefer Turkey for Education

African youth prefer to pursue education outside their continent, particularly in the USA and European countries, due to security issues, instability, economic crises, and inadequate educational budgets in their home countries. Additionally, the scholarships, accommodation, job opportunities, and favorable laboratory and classroom conditions offered by these countries motivate young people to leave their countries for education. It is also worth noting that obtaining an education in Western countries

is perceived as a "prestige" in many African countries. At this point, African youth prefer education abroad to gain status and enhance their acceptance levels within their societies (Kavak, October 27, 2024).

There are various reasons why African youth prefer Turkey for education. Turkey's hospitable and predominantly Muslim environment, its geographical location, and the significance of Istanbul for African youth contribute to this preference. It is important to highlight that African youth studying in Turkey feel at home, do not experience racism or discrimination, and in fact, report instances of positive discrimination and no mistreatment in Turkey (TDV, February 22, 2020).

In deepening Turkey's relations with African countries, the efforts of public and civil institutions and individuals are significant, but undoubtedly, President Erdoğan's initiatives also play a crucial role. In his speeches in both 2021 and 2024, when xenophobia in Turkey also affected African students, President Erdoğan emphasized the importance of African students studying in Turkey. In his 2021 speech, he addressed African students, saying;

"I particularly request you to consider Turkey as your second homeland. When you return to your countries, each of you will hopefully represent us as honorary ambassadors of Turkey and the Turkish nation. We will continue to assist you both during your education here and after your graduation through our relevant institutions" (TCBB, December 16, 2021).

In his speech in 2024, President Erdoğan stated, "Saying 'Let no foreign students come to Turkey' means saying 'Let our state not expand its sphere of influence, let our country not break its shell.' We are also enhancing our cooperation with the continent in the fields of education and culture. We see that Turkish universities are increasingly becoming a hub for guest students. During our visits to the African continent, we encounter ministers, businessmen, academics, and politicians who speak Turkish and see themselves as ambassadors of our nation's heart. Of course, this picture disturbs the imperialist powers that have exploited Africa's resources for years. One of the reasons for the increasing anti-Turkey publications in the international media is precisely this." (TCBB, May 6, 2024).

The Reflection of Anti-Foreigner Sentiment on African Students in Turkey

President Erdoğan's statements regarding foreign students stem from the increasing anti-foreigner sentiment in Turkey, which also affects African students. Indeed, in recent years, the backlash against irregular migrants first from Syria and then from Asian countries reflected on African students in the first quarter of 2024, just before the local elections on March 31st. During the election month, some social media posts at Karabük University, where foreign students are predominantly enrolled, brought up the issue of increasing infectious diseases, attributing them to African students (Yeniçağ, March 22, 2024). It is noteworthy that these unsubstantiated claims were voiced before President Erdoğan's election rally in Karabük on March 22nd (AA, March 23, 2024). After the election, Bolu Mayor Tanju Özcan stated on April 16, 2024, that there had been an increase in the number of students coming from Africa to Bolu Abant İzzet Baysal University. He mentioned conducting efforts targeting students admitted to the university for payment without any prior graduation, and he announced a significant increase in bus ticket prices for these students. Zafer Party Chairman Prof. Dr. Ümit Özdağ stated, following the spotlight on Karabük University;

"Students should come from Africa to Turkey. The negative examples at Karabük and Kütahya Universities, as well as bribery allegations, should not hinder African students from coming to Turkey. Because this will be Turkey's soft power in Africa. However, those who come should be chosen carefully, bribery allegations should be eliminated, successful students should be able to come to our country, comprehensive health examinations should be required, and those who come should be prevented from dropping out of school and entering the workforce." (Özdağ, March 23, 2024). In the context of these examples, the reflection of anti-foreign sentiment on African students in Turkey recalls discriminatory attitudes towards Turks going to Germany as laborers or towards Turkish students who preferred France before the 1980s. Indeed, the negative attitude towards Turks in France led Turkish students who chose France to turn to countries like the UK or the US (Kavas, May 5, 2024).

Tensions and reactions have arisen among African students studying or having studied in Turkey in response to anti-foreign student measures that came to the forefront in cities like Kütahya, Bolu, and Afyonkarahisar before and after the March 31 local elections in Turkey. The dissemination of deliberate or unconscious misinformation and the exploitation of the issue by political interest groups hindered efforts to resolve the current crisis. Moreover, practices targeting graduates of Turkish universities, which were previously directed at students from other countries, have resurfaced during these periods. For instance, the social media posts of Muhammed Abdullahi, a Somali graduate of a Turkish university and one of the partners of the Somali Sofra restaurant in Ankara, could be cited as an example (Kavak, 2024: 1-19).

Afro-African students graduating from Turkish universities seem hesitant to vocalize the negative experiences they encounter during their education. Despite facing various issues such as residency procedures and discriminatory rhetoric, they often choose not to openly express their complaints, although they may discuss them privately in individual conversations. While there are various reasons for this reluctance, some African students do openly voice their criticisms through their social media accounts. The social media posts of African students, especially in response to reactions towards African students at Karabük University and Bolu Mayor Özcan's announcement regarding the increase in transportation fees for African students, have increased recently.

Social Media Posts of African Students

The social media posts of African students have become an important platform for expressing their experiences and challenges in Turkey in recent times. Especially following incidents in cities like Karabük University and Bolu, it is observed that African students use social media to voice their concerns and grievances.

In these posts, issues such as discrimination during the educational process, increases in transportation fees, difficulties in residency procedures, and generally living conditions in Turkey are highlighted. African students use social media as a tool to express their experiences and emphasize areas in the Turkish education system that need improvement. These posts can draw public attention and contribute to taking steps towards resolving the issues.

User named Abdihakim Kalale, in his post, criticized Mayor Özcan's statements by saying;

"The gentleman's insulting and derogatory remarks about African students have deeply saddened us, and we want him to know that we are not as he described. I would like to add that we believe the majority of the people do not share his views and are on our side. We believe that campaigns against international students, who are ambassador candidates of their countries in Turkey, should be countered by informing and integrating students into society before they escalate and get out of hand. I think it would be beneficial for both students and society... because students live among the people and interact with them accordingly. Therefore, students should be informed about the economic problems and refugee issues. If these are not addressed, Turkey's efforts could be in vain, and the campaigners will have achieved their goals." (Kalale, May 17, 2024).

The user named Kaafi, in a post dated April 17, 2024, warned that Turkey's African policy could be at risk, stating,

"Turkey is now governed by a different mindset. Turkey is a complete failure, wasting money on Africa. Racism in Turkey is nonexistent anywhere else in the world. Europeans, of course, also do not like Africans, but they do not express their feelings outwardly." (Kaafi, May 17, 2024).

Muhammed Abdullahi, undoubtedly, was the most active user during March-April 2024. Abdullahi, a partner of the "Somali Sofra" establishment, which started operating in Ankara in 2019 but was forced to close two years later, is of Somali descent and has received education in Turkey. Abdullahi has frequently voiced both the pressures directed at his establishment and those directed at himself on social media platform X. Especially in Karabük, Bolu, and Afyonkarahisar, he has been the most vocal critic of the discourse and practices targeting foreigners being directed towards African students. It should be noted that Abdullahi has gained more prominence than other African students due to the ongoing practices directed at him over the years and particularly his presence abroad.

Abdullahi criticized the decision announced by the Afyonkarahisar Municipality on May 2nd to raise the marriage fee for refugees to 10,000 TL, describing this situation as "fascism" and "a disgraceful practice" (Abdullahi, May 3, 2024).

Continuing his legal battle, Abdullahi won the case he filed in April 2024 to annul the decision of TİHEK (Turkish Human Rights and Equality Institution) regarding Somali Sofra. The court accepted the clause stating that the law enforcement practices targeting Somali Sofra were due to the owners being Somali. Abdullahi shared the court's decision regarding his establishment Somali Sofra on his social media account on April 16, 2024, stating, "The truth is always bitter. We've been fighting for almost 3 years to prevent such bad things from happening, but the authorities said our state does not make mistakes. Hey authorities, now with the court decision, it has been REGISTERED that the Turkish police discriminated and acted RACIST towards us just because we are Somali!" With these words, he criticized and brought attention to the discrimination and racism he faced (Abdullahi, April 16, 2024).

Abdullahi, whose establishment Somali Sofra was closed and who criticized the decision of TİHEK against them, is seen to share thoughts on Turkey's domestic politics in his social media posts. While Abdullahi's posts initially focused on defending his own rights, especially in 2024, they have evolved towards criticism of Turkey's domestic politics and decisions made.

Indeed, in his post dated April 19, 2024, Abdullahi criticized the Zafer Party by stating;

"The Turkish Human Rights and Equality Institution @tihek_kurumsal claims there is no discrimination and racism in this video and defends that these events are normal in Turkey! I think TİHEK should be closed down and replaced by the Zafer Party!" (Abdullahi, 2024). These criticisms were reflected in Abdullahi's posts regarding the Gaza process (Abdullahi, April 19, 2024), Amed Spor's championship (Abdullahi, April 28, 2024), and May 1st (Abdullahi, May 1, 2024). Indeed, this situation was also expressed in the following comment made on the posts: "Now they closed this guy's (Abdullahi) shop, and he is right about that issue. But then this person went on to join the ranks of those who blatantly oppose the state and started tweeting according to the separatists' perspective on outrageous events" (Serhat, April 25, 2024).

Tensions arising from the reflection of anti-immigrant sentiment in Turkey onto international students also lead to conceptual confusion, which is reflected in social media posts. For instance, a social media account introducing the international student association as an immigrant association sparked the reaction of African students. Abdullahi expressed his reaction by saying, "It's not the Immigrant but the International Students Federation, you fools." (Abdullahi, May 13, 2024).

Abdulkadir Hoshes, a graduate of a Turkish university, drew attention to what he perceived as "discriminatory" and "racist" attitudes towards Abdullahi on his social media account. He shared his experience by saying;

"#I was a student at Istanbul Aydın University. One evening, my friend and I went to a cafe to watch a football match. After the match, some people sitting there started to harass us. When we asked what the problem was, a large group attacked us and broke my friend's leg. We took my friend to the emergency room and went to the police station with the arriving police. I remember the police shouting angrily at me, 'Go back where you came from.'" (Hoshes, April 17, 2024).

On the other hand, Hoshes showed support for Abdullahi after winning his legal battle by saying, "I am glad you won the court against Turkish racism. This serves a powerful lesson for any racist in #Turkiye and around the world." (Hoshes, April 24, 2024).

There are also Turkish-educated African students who express criticism towards Abdullahi's social media posts, and Abdihakim Kalale is one of them. In response to Abdullahi's posts criticizing Turkey following the local elections in March 2024, Kalale addressed Abdullahi by saying, "Brother, you represent us in one way or another, this may be your personal opinion, but as us (students who have studied in Turkey with the opportunities provided by the state), we must defend the unity and solidarity of the Turkish Republic just as they defend our territorial integrity." (Os-kay, March 22, 2024).

Sharing President Erdoğan's speech on foreign student mobility dated May 6th, Abdihakim Kalale said, "Thanks to President @RTErdogan, tens of thousands of African students graduate from Turkish universities and serve their countries with the patriotism they have learned here. We are ONLY grateful to Turkey and Erdogan." (Kalale, May 7, 2024).

Conclusion

Tensions towards immigrants in Turkey have also affected African students who come to Turkey for education, following the reactions towards Syrian and Afghan immigrants. Particularly during the local elections in March, reactions towards African students increased due to internal politics and economic developments. African students are seen trying to make their voices heard through social media against discriminatory treatment. Although African students express their thoughts openly in private conversations, they hesitate to do so publicly for various reasons and refrain from criticism.

African students who criticize discriminatory treatment against them on social media primarily do so in Turkish. Therefore, it is observed that developments related to African students in Turkey are not widely reflected in the international media.

Critical social media posts by African students regarding discriminatory treatment receive interactions and likes, indicating that others are also affected by negative developments and emphasizing the seriousness of the issue. However, due to various reservations, it should be noted that African students do not comment much on negative situations on social media, and criticisms are carried out through a few accounts. The discriminatory treatment towards African students studying in Turkey, at times, may inadvertently or deliberately support propaganda or activities against Turkey conducted by those who are referred to as "cultural ambassadors". This situation may lead to a negative change in the perception of Turkey, especially in African countries and internationally.

Abdullahi, who criticized the closure of his business, Somali Sofrası, and TİHEK's decision against them, is observed to share his thoughts on Turkish domestic politics on social media. While Abdullahi's posts initially aimed to defend himself, especially in 2024, they evolved towards criticism of Turkish domestic politics and decisions. It is noteworthy that Somali students are more inclined to react to negative approaches towards African students in Turkey. Undoubtedly, the significant impact of the practices against Somali Sofrası in 2019-2020 plays a crucial role in this. This demonstrates that individuals negatively affected by a past event naturally bring it up in new developments.

Lastly, it should be emphasized that the mismanagement, racist rhetoric, or xenophobia towards African students described as "cultural" or "heart" ambassadors inevitably turns against Turkey. This process poses a risk of negatively affecting both Turkey's international image and its African policy. Therefore, it is imperative for official or civilian decision-makers in Turkey to intervene promptly in these crisis moments and find solutions.

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