

The “Akbelen case”: How to Handle the Dilemma Between Energy Needs, Environmental Requirements, and International Obligations? - Mehmet Öğütçü



Before

we start discussing the Akbelen case in detail, it should be said from the outset that we cannot waste hundreds of years of forest stock, water and agricultural resources, tourism values, archaeological heritage, and our people’s well-being just to provide energy production resources.

It

is tough to understand the further expansion of the lignite deposits in the Akbelen case to feed coal-fired thermal power plants, let alone the gradual exit from coal in line with the “Carbon Zero” 2053 target and commitments.

As

a matter of fact, the sin is not a new one. Installing three coal-fired thermal power plants (including Yatağan) on this lush coastline was a mind-boggling strategic planning mistake. So, the button was fastened wrong from the beginning.

Seriously damaging the ecosystem

It

is possible for more solar, wind, geothermal, biomass, and even natural gas resources to replace thermal power plants (over time), supplemented by storage and energy efficiency as needed. But I would like to point out that there is no immediate solution on the horizon apart from shutting down the power plants, converting their boilers to process other fuels, quickly putting green energy into operation, or sending excess electricity from other regions.

With

the existing tree massacre, coal extraction from the area to be opened, and letting the current power plants continue their operations will seriously damage our invaluable ecosystem, which will take centuries to replace. Akbelen is vital as it is a rain catchment basin for the region’s agriculture.

Following the cutting of the forest, the coal mines, which are planned to be developed, may also adversely affect the region’s agriculture. It is understood that not only Milas but also Bodrum’s (already limited) drinking water resources are at the risk line.

Companies are targeted, but not the government that grants the permission

We know that the plundering of the country's resources is not limited only to Akbelen. Today, similar scenes are experienced in all regions and villages in Turkey. Some are quarries, some are granite or marble, some are gold and silver mines, and some are hydroelectric power plants like Hasankeyf - they have mercilessly destroyed our habitats, historical heritage, and eco-climates.

Interestingly, although these power plants are taken over from the state, and the state issues all licenses, the criticism arrows are directed in considerable measure to the operators of the power plants, Limak and IC İÇTAŞ. The co-responsible regulatory state, however, chooses to remain silent, and the opposition's response is poor. It is necessary to be careful against social media, which plays a vital role in publicizing the "Akbelen case" in the broadest way, for political manipulation by some.

Efforts to clear the forest will shoot us all in the heel. This will have profound international repercussions for Turkey and the companies carrying out these actions.

Coal power plants can be converted

Saving Akbelen from politicization with an intelligent strategy can set an example for other cases, and it can contribute significantly to our green transformation efforts, the well-being of the people of the region, and our ability to face international reactions that will bring us down in the league of environment

and climate change.

If necessary, instead of eliminating forest areas for coal resources, these thermal power plants (although they are far from an alternative to a base load power plant of this scale) should be turned green with international funds within a specific calendar. In the short term, with modifications to the power plant boilers designed for regional coal, the use of other coal sources should be made possible.

Now the genie is out of the lamp; Neither the state nor companies have the luxury of acting as if nothing had happened.

There's no need for a conflictual situation. At the point where the country's interests and ecological balances require, it is a virtue to turn back from the wrong path.

At the same time, special efforts should be made to ensure that those who do not comprehend the backdrop of the electricity generation process, and those who consume electricity generously without being aware of its source, see the other side of the coin.

**Where
will we find the energy?**

We often hear from environmental massacre lobbies, "They are against coal,

nuclear, wind turbines, hydroelectric power plants, and natural gas pipelines. Well, how will we meet this country's rapidly increasing energy needs?" The question remains unanswered.

As someone who has devoted decades of work to energy issues and contributed to energy security and creative solutions worldwide, I can say this is the wrong question.

Of course, we must ensure our energy needs and uninterrupted supply security, but by reducing foreign dependency as much as possible, narrowing down our current account deficit, realizing green transformation away from fossil fuels, putting energy efficiency into greater use, and developing new technologies and financial models.

We can always procure energy from different sources by paying whatever the cost. But it will take hundreds of years to regain the ecological balance and natural heritage that will be eroded, and we cannot see them for generations. We must hold this essential truth above all other facts, not only for the Akbelen case but for all the assets of our country.

While promising to reduce coal

Especially at a time when efforts are being made to transition to green energy all over the world to combat the global climate crisis and restrict the production and use of coal within the framework of "Zero Carbon" international obligations, and gradually closing thermal power plants are among the priority targets.

A few months later (30 November - 12 December 2023), Turkey is expected to update its greenhouse gas emission reduction target before the COP28 United Nations Climate Summit in Abu Dhabi.

Let alone accelerating efforts in this direction, forests, and olive groves are cut down, agriculture and water basins are destroyed, villages are wiped off the map, and archaeological heritage is destroyed to meet the coal needs of thermal power plants in Turkey.

There is no justification for energy or precious metal production in our country, which already has a grossly deteriorated ecological balance, faces increasingly green poverty, and is at a high risk of desertification, about half of its surface area (48.6 percent: current situation 25.5 percent + potential 23.1 percent). Nothing can justify further deforestation. Especially the fact that the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, responsible for protecting nature, signed this destruction license is incredible and difficult to explain.

Important but transformable

The first unit of Kemerköy Thermal Power Plant was commissioned in 1993. In 2014, the Yeniköy Thermal Power Plant, another public enterprise, was transferred to the İÇTAŞ Energy partnership of Limak, headed by Nihat Özdemir and İbrahim Çeçen. After that date, although belatedly, despite the criticism that it was insufficient, a specific chimney treatment investment was made, facilities were tamed to adapt to the environment, and efficiency was increased to produce more electricity with less coal—Caesar's right to Caesar.

Yeniköy-Kemerköy

Power Plants, with a total installed power of 1,095 MW, meet a small portion of approximately 1 percent of our country's electricity capacity (104,904 MW as of June 2023). The domestic lignite source used in the power plants also provides some savings in natural gas imports.

As

a matter of fact, it is not a "must-have" reality for Turkey. It is easy to meet this rate quickly with energy efficiency improvements that will save up to 30 percent. If the information provided by the company is correct, the power plants (as well as the new ones being built) maintain their vital importance for this region, as they supply approximately a sizeable 62 percent of the electricity used in the South Aegean.

Woodland turned to the lunar surface

When

you look at the photos and video footage, people rebel. Thousands of hectares of land have already been converted to the lunar surface to supply lignite coal to their thermal power plants. New cuts are on the way. Suppose Akbelen is included in the 220 thousand-hectare coalfields. In that case, there is a risk that İzikköy and other villages will be liquidated if the villager and environmentalist resistance do not yield results and the state and companies do not intervene immediately.

However,

we must remember that this ecological forest area serves not only energy but, more importantly, more vital public benefits from water resources to agricultural production, from tourism to health and oxygen corridor.

The

company is doing it wrong

Yeniköy-Kemerköy

Elektrik Üretim ve Ticaret A.Ş (YK Energy) responded to the reactions that they produced 51 billion kWh of electricity from lignite coal between 2015-2022, that the company has underground coal reserves of 156 million tons. It also stated that it needed to extract the lignite reserve under the Akbelen Forest. Considering the license area of 23,307 hectares, the 78-hectare Akbelen Forest covers a tiny area, it argued.

The

statement also states that “if mining activities do not continue in the Akbelen forest area, electricity production at our power plant will have to stop within 2024”.

From

my point of view, the company, making a grave mistake, still looks at the Akbelen case through the glasses of supplying coal to the power plants, ignoring the real reason for the reactions, while the images of women hugging trees and the gendarmerie and the police spraying pepper gas are circulating.

As

far as I can see, companies do not perform well in this regard in terms of strategic communication. It is not possible to quell this rising reaction with press releases. They must develop a realistic alternative vision extending to the medium term in cooperation with the state.

The energy-coal-forest nexus

Of

course, we should all act together to prevent ecological disasters. We are hand in hand, but we also need to underline this fact in the context of energy-coal-forest.

Our country is heavily dependent on foreign oil and natural gas. On the other hand, in terms of coal source and production amounts, it is at the middle level in lignite and the lower level in hard coal (anthracite). 5.5 percent of the world's total proven lignite resource, approximately 3.4 percent of lignite and sub-bituminous coal resources, and approximately 1.1 percent of the total world coal resources, including anthracite, are in Turkey. Private sector companies control 41.7 percent of lignite resources, EUAŞ 44.73 percent, and TKİ 10.87 percent.

There are 405 MW asphaltite, 10,374 MW imported coal, 10,191 MW lignite, and 841 MW hard coal power plants within the electricity installed power of the country.

Coal is “domestic and national,” but...

In other words, coal power plants have a substantial share in the total installed power of our country. The average is 21 percent. Coal has been maintaining its importance for years as a “domestic and national” energy source in our country. Hence, it's not a new problem. Creating a solution quickly from today to tomorrow does not also seem easy.

The Turkish National Energy Plan published in December 2022 foresaw a “1.7 GW domestic coal power plant will be added to the system by 2030, considering the

problems and difficulties encountered in the reserve development process of the existing planned fields in our country.”

It should be noted that there are over 2,400 coal-fired thermal power plants with a total installed power of 2,100 GW, not only in Turkey but also in 79 countries worldwide. Therefore, this grave coal problem is a headache not only for us but also for many countries, notably China, India, Russia, the USA, and Poland.

“Green Deal” and access to finance

Let's keep the priority of “domestic and national” resources hot on the agenda as much as we want. Yet, we cannot stay out of the green transformation and clean fuels trend gaining strength worldwide. The mentality of “what is with us stays with us; you cannot intervene from the outside” is no longer valid, especially on climate change issues. Just as human rights violations and acts of genocide have become international crimes, policies and breaches that lead to further climate change will increasingly be subject to international sanctions with binding political and economic consequences.

As in the European Union's Green Deal, trade barriers, difficulties in accessing finance, and political pressures will come one after another. Countries and companies that do not comply will most certainly face the risk of being isolated.

In addition to ecological reasons, we must reckon that archaeological excavations

were also carried out in the region in question, and finds such as a Byzantine church, many tombs, and oil houses were located. The lawsuit to declare the area an archaeological site was dismissed at the end of 2022.

Therefore,

its echoes have not yet been reflected in the interior, but there will likely be intense reactions from the international community to this green destruction in Akbelen before long. Severe sanctions may be imposed not only on the government that gave the license and condoned the destruction of nature but also on the IC İÇTAŞ energy partnership (as well as their companies in other sectors), which carries out the destruction with the motive of commercial gains.

In any case, the priority should be nature. Those who try to draw a similarity between the “Akbelen case” and the Gezi Park protests should listen to their conscience and support the efforts of protecting our country’s nature and archaeological heritage entrusted to us with a non-partisan approach. Nobody should try to derive political gains from this situation.

Of course, it is necessary to look at the other side of the coin, understand the perspectives of coal producers and power plant operators, and consider their interests reasonably. But under no circumstances shall we allow the felling of forests, the destruction of water and agricultural lands. Commercial losses can be compensated by government financial and policy support and subsidies if necessary. Whatever the price, it must be paid, in a transparent and accountable way, even in the current economic crisis.

**Akbelen
case may be a milestone**

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“Akbelen case” may create a new milestone. The impact of coal-fired power plants on the environment and climate change, and the fact that lignite is among the most polluting sources, oblige us to accelerate clean energy (which has already reached 54 percent of the installed electricity capacity) efforts, including nuclear. In the process that started with the Paris Climate Agreement, Turkey’s roadmap to transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy and to bring its emissions closer to zero is now of particular importance.

Companies

in Akbelen, which try to be hampered by non-governmental organizations and local villagers, fail to show a convincing performance regarding ethical values, social and environmental responsibility, sensitivity to green, and environmental impact analysis. This means they are willing to pay financial costs, harming themselves and losing their reputation as an international business partner for their current and future projects.

Loss of sustainability and reputation

I recommend that these energy companies of our country reconsider their statements and commitments on “sustainability,” develop a comprehensive strategy of engagement with stakeholders, and put forward a coordinated schedule with the government for the transition from coal to other fuels and the use of advanced technology towards this end.

Otherwise, the possibility of losing their reputation and even being blacklisted not only in Turkey but also in the global league (not only in energy but also in other sectors) is a real one.

In all these problems, the state's regulatory role, which has made strategic mistakes from the past to the present, should also be questioned. Lessons should be learned from the Akbelen case, and the country's energy production, transmission, distribution, and consumption maps should be arranged in a more environmentally-climate-friendly and efficient way.

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