

What Went Wrong in Turkey?

From Muslim Democracy to Illiberal Democracy

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phoenix 

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Introduction: Post-Kemalist but Still Illiberal Turkey

MANY, INCLUDING MYSELF, EXPECTED THAT THE DEFEAT OF Kemalism by a broad coalition of liberals, democrats and conservatives under the political leadership of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) would lead to a democratic regime in Turkey with a liberal constitution.

A post-Kemalist state has turned to be disillusionment because it has not evolved into a democratic one. Kemalism is dead but its state-centric, Jacobin and illiberal spirit has been reincarnated in the AKP. The similarities in the attitude and the policies of the AKP and its Kemalist predecessors are striking. Using the state apparatus to construct a “a new society,” trying to subordinate individuals and civil society to the state, employing the state's coercive means to punish its opponents, viewing the world from the perspective of a siege mentality and describing the world as plotting against it are common both to the AKP and its old rivals, the Kemalists.

Thus, the post-Kemalist Turkey is still not a liberal democracy because the Kemalist heritage has been passed on to the AKP. Yes, the military has been stripped of the undemocratic power that it used to enjoy in the name of

Kemalism. This could have been a very good start for building a full-fledged democracy with the principles of human rights, the rule of law and fundamental freedoms. Yet a new regime has been established, a mirror image of the old one, in which all power is monopolized by a single person, Erdogan, without any check and balance mechanism.

What we have at the end, therefore, is not a liberal democracy but a populist authoritarian regime that justifies its illiberal intrusions in the economy and society as well as in the lives of individuals by references to the vague notions of national will, values of “our nation and civilization” and “our historical mission.”

When these references fall short, the AKP does not hesitate to resort to conspiracy theories that link dissenting views and opposition protests to the “external enemies of Turkey” in order to delegitimize and discredit its opponents. Any opposition is portrayed as a plot to bring down the government; each opposition movement and any dissenting voices are accused of collaborating with the enemies of Turkey. The logical and natural outcome of this trend will be criminalizing the opposition.

In order to keep the party grassroots mobilized, irrelevant analogies are constantly made between Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and former Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi, and coups in Turkey's past and the recent coup in Egypt. Most recently the execution of senior Jamaat-e-Islami party leader Abdul Qader Molla in Bangladesh is cited to this end. These analogies not only spread fear and a deep sense of insecurity,

and thus the need for unity behind the party and the leader but also pave the way for authoritarian measures against actual and potential sources of opposition.

Especially since the Gezi protests, the AKP regards politics as a matter of “survival,” securitizing the process, actors and the language of political competition. We know from our Kemalist past that through securitizing politics comes justification for authoritarian policies. Therefore, it is not surprising now that the AKP leaders constantly talk of “internal enemies,” and Bulent Arinc, one of the leading figures of the party threatens journalists, saying they “should be prepared to spend four to five years in jail if they want to be heroes.”

The government wants so much to be free of the mechanisms of checks and balances that even the presence of civil society is now viewed as a threat. For them civil society, as in the old Kemalist days, should belong to the realm of the state, rather than playing a role of interacting between society and state. It seems that the AKP and its Islamist allies are relying on the coercive and distributive power of the state to force civil society to be subordinate to the state and the party.

In terms of its ideology and leadership, this is a post-Kemalist state, but it is one that maintains its authoritarian characteristics.

In the long run the nature of the state-society relationship in Turkey does not change. In the past, society in Turkey was under the “tutelage” of the Kemalists, who controlled key

state institutions like the military, judiciary and high bureaucracy. They dominated political actors and processes. Society was weak, dependant on the state. With a struggle conducted by a broad coalition of people that included conservatives, liberals, the Kurds as well as various social and economic groups, the tutelage system was largely eliminated during the AKP reign. The military was put under the control of the government, the judiciary -- including the Constitutional Court -- was transformed and the bureaucracy subdued. It appeared that society penetrated into the height of power through the agency of the AKP and positioned itself above the state.

Is this really the case? Is the society now more autonomous vis-à-vis the state? Has the elimination of the Kemalist tutelage empowered society?

Not really... It is hard to change the genetics of the state and society as well as their relationship. A state-centric culture has been the tradition of this country. It does not change in a decade or so. The state in this land has always been the constituting agency dominating and shaping the society.

In the past, when the constituting role of the state was performed with a secular "world view" that excluded religious groups and masses from the power center, it prompted an opposition of the conservatives. This opposition appeared as being directed at undemocratic characteristics of the state. Then, on the common ground of establishing a democratic regime the secular democrats and conservatives

formed a broad coalition that indeed broke the Kemalist tutelage over the society and politics.

After such a success, there is still talk about the possibility of authoritarianism in Turkey. The basis of this possibility I think lay in the way in which the conservatives, the driving force and political agents of this process, view the state and its relationship with the society.

It seems that the political conservatives have never questioned the central-constituting role of the state. They did not have any problem with the notion of a state that has a “constituting role” over society, but only disagreed about the content of this role. They objected to a state that undertook the mission of raising secular Kemalist youth, but gratefully approved the mission of the state to bring up a religious generation.

Political conservatives, too, believe in the possibility of “creating a new society” by state intervention. That is to say that the “social engineering” of a “constituting state” is not ruled out. This is the background to what Tayyip Erdoğan said; “the new constitution will be in harmony with the values of our nation.” This means that “values” attributed to the nation are regarded as constitutive of the “new Turkey.” What are those “values”? Who will interpret them and how will they be integrated into the new constitution? Of course, all these will be settled by the powerful, i.e., the state.

It seems that as the ownership of the state has passed over to the political conservatives the “critical distance” between the conservatives and the state started to disappear.

What the conservatives call the “state-society merger” has deprived this social group, which used to position itself vis-à-vis the state, of its autonomy.

The marriage of conservatives and the state under the AKP rule has weakened society and empowered the state - the state of the conservatives this time.

Some may describe this as “bringing the conservative periphery into the center via democratic participation.” This is partly true, but this process does not empower and emancipate society, instead society once again is defeated by the patronage of the state. A striking example of this is the so-called “Anatolian tigers,” the conservative business circle that started to emerge in the late 1980s.

The “Anatolian tigers” did not depend on the state and they did not owe their existence to the state. They largely benefited from Turkey's opening up to the world and the accompanying competition in the market. By the end of the 1990s, the Anatolian tigers pushed for democratic governance and became the autonomous social agent that paved the way for the emergence of the AKP. Where are they now? Are they still autonomous of the state? Or have they become dependent on state bids? The “AKP state” has overtaken the social and economic space previously had been claimed by the conservatives ending their autonomy and turning them into dependant agents of the state. 15.12. 2013; 21.04.2013