

# Turkey on Its Way to Europe: A Shift in the Domestic Con- figuration of Power?

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The domestic political scene in Turkey has long been defined by a tense interaction of the centre and the periphery in the use of power. As Necati Polat shows in his article, the recent referendum in Turkey is only the last step in a profound reconfiguration of power in Turkish society.

The domestic political scene in Turkey has long been defined by a tense interaction of the centre and the periphery in the use of power. The centre, ruled by a mindset of top-down and heavy-handed Westernization known as Kemalism, notoriously with emphasis on the pastiche of a European way of life, from dress codes to specific social practices, is formed by the bureaucracy, both military and civilian, in league with the elite in the media, arts and academia, and with Istanbul-based big business in the habit of relying on good relations with the bureaucracy for profit. Those in the periphery are traditional Muslims in all walks of life, crushed in the early republican era with bans on, and censorship of, religious symbols in public life; and Kurds, who, with a history of short-lived rebellions in modern Turkey in defiance of officially enforced Turkification, have until recently been distant dwellers of a mainly rural area.

It needs to be pointed out, however, that, characteristically, this polarity has been one that allows individuals in the periphery to move to the centre by becoming part of the elite, enabled by a mostly egalitarian system of education, and by renouncing values and demands associated with the periphery. A specific ambivalence in this regard seems to be presented by a heterogeneous religious community, Alevis, who form more than 10 percent of the population, and who have been subjected historically to extrajudicial killings and mass extermination by the bureaucracy, and to pogroms, with or without the consent of elements within the bureaucracy. Yet, because Alevis ostensibly find the traditional Muslims more of a threat than the bureaucracy, they have been staunch supporters of the centre.

As Turkey has been negotiating accession for membership in the European Union, the currents of ongoing Europeanization, felt more and more by the domestic actors, appear to have brought about a re-shuffling of the established configuration involving power, signalling a gradual empowerment of the periphery, traditional Muslims and Kurds, long disenfranchised from extensive forms of politics. The intrusion by European governance into the domestic political cosmology has in turn transformed the traditionally West-ward looking elite in the centre into a position which is marked by a virtual demonization of the "West," understood as a monolithic entity that is ironically in keeping with the Islamist perceptions of Europe and the United States. This seems to be a sudden and paradoxical change on the part of the forces of the centre. Some

commentators suggest, however, that a sceptical view of the wider world has always been part and parcel of Kemalism.

The West, in this view, simply continues the age-old imperialism which it is known for, and which Kemal Atatürk had to fight at the inception of modern Turkey. Yet, this time imperialism is under a different guise, that of democracy and human rights, showing its seditious face, with a view to dismembering and ultimately devouring Turkey. The Islamists represented by the ruling Party for Justice and Development (AKP), with roots in organized political Islam, the argument goes, are either deliberate or gullible collaborators of this imperialism in their determination to undermine national security via a discourse of integration with Europe. The sceptical attitude on human rights and democracy, as displayed in the argument, has been remarkably aided by the global trend, emphasized by the terrorist attacks in the United States and in Europe in the last decade, of pairing and contrasting “rights” with “security.”

“Democracy, but at what price?” is an often asked rhetorical question which equates Kurdish demands for basic rights with separatism, typifying the prevailing mood. “Do human rights include a freedom to destroy freedom?” is another, which is inclined to view the traditional Muslim demands for the lifting of the ban on headscarf at universities as a potential threat to those women who do not wear headscarf. Overall, the value of democracy is recognized as an asset of the exalted Western way of life. Yet, reservations soon follow in the form of scepticism about the frame of mind of the little or less educated for ideal choices. As a show business celebrity recently stated in a highly-rated TV show, triggering a sensational nation-wide debate: “It is just not fair that my vote and that of a shepherd on a mountain skirt should have the same weight.”

Since there is nothing this mindset can do about the exercise of popular vote, long part of the political scene, the solution has been to hold sway over the popular vote via the military and the high court system, termed by the liberal critics an “order of tutelage” that is not dissimilar to the infamous *velayet-e faqih*, the mullah trusteeship system in the neighbouring Iran. Yet, with the increasing Europeanization, reforms introduced to the system have made the bureaucratic control of the government more and more difficult. The frustration led in the mid-2000s to several large-scale meetings, public protests and marches by the supporters of the bureaucracy against the transformation in the system, with participants notably sporting Turkish flags while chanting against the pro-European government accused of selling out the country. The meetings have

been widely commented on as calls on the military to take over the administration.

The government has been able to hold the soaring tension in check through two means, both products of conjuncture. One is increasing stability in the economy, a litmus test after the country hit practically the rock bottom in 2001, the year before the government took over the mandate. Second, and perhaps more important, is a rare atmosphere of relative consensus in society around European values, as advocated by the government, which has facilitated legal investigations into alleged military and paramilitary conspiracies to terrorize masses by reportedly creating havoc in the country, if not to justify a possible military takeover, to impose a security-centred outlook on policies, as demanded in Kemalist circles.

The legal investigations, which started in 2007, have led to the detention, arrest and conviction of a great number of prominent people. The accused include some of the highest-ranking members of the military, retired or in office, and ultra-nationalist (or the Turkish-style neo-con) politicians and journalists known for their anti-Europe, anti-West views. Nothing other than a newly found and dedicated enough social consensus would make it possible for figures of this prominence to face trial in a country paralyzed in the past via a succession of military takeovers. The chilling allegations against the accused, publicly debated, have delivered a significant blow to the Kemalist coalition. More important still, some among the accused have been known by the public for masterminding and executing the massive intimidation and harassment of intellectuals such as Orhan Pamuk and Hrant Dink for their anti-establishment views, by using a myriad of mafia tactics and by issuing threats. (Pamuk had to leave the country, having been advised to that effect by the police; Dink, who refused to leave, was subsequently murdered). The containment of some of the anti-Europe figures in the continuing legal investigations has proved conducive to an intellectual environment that was not constantly terrorized – as in the past – by allegations of breaches in national security, instrumental to block initiatives towards political normalization.

In bringing about a pro-European consensus, the government has been crucially assisted by liberals and a significant number of left-wing intellectuals in the media, who have attracted to the pro-European position the support of well-educated Turks outside traditional Muslim milieus, the so-called “white Turks”; in addition, they also served to translate for the international public

opinion the developments in Turkey, securing for the government invaluable international backing. The last decisive step in the path to normalization has been a set of constitutional amendments, supported by 58 percent of votes in a heated referendum in September 2010, which enables the prosecution of those involved in the last bloody military coup in 1980, and which opens the system of appointment in the high judiciary to relative democratic representation. Observers find that now, for the first time, the government is strong enough to work out a democratic solution to the protracted Kurdish problem.

Paradoxically, the very move on the part of Turkey towards integration into Europe was initially a strategy inspired by the identity politics of the elite in the centre, motivated by pastiche and mimicry of a European way of life. Unlike what is often assumed, Turkey applied to the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1959 not for economic reasons. Economic analyses of membership did not come before the second half of 1960s. And when economic analyses were finally advanced, mainly pursued by the newly set up State Planning Agency (DPT), they were less than favourable. The DPT, manned mostly by the flourishing social groups of socialist economists and conservative engineers newly recruited for the centre (including Turgut Ozal, later the Prime Minister and the President, with a radically changed view of Turkey's European prospects), voiced the opinion that integration with Europe would be economically ruinous for Turkey, as the country could not possibly compete with the European production levels and markets. Nor did Turkey apply to the EEC for security reasons. The mainstream literature on the topic often cites the application by Greece, only the preceding month in the same year, as having forced Turkish policy-makers for the move. This view omits, however, that the relationship at the time between Greece and Turkey was one more of companionship than rivalry. This was the case at least from the perspective of the Turkish policy-makers. Greece's application did clearly have a catalytic effect, though, not because of rivalry, but because the Turkish administration counted on the West in the habit of coupling Greece and Turkey together, treating the two equally, a Cold War pattern increasingly clear from the Truman Doctrine of 1947 onwards. Turkey, it was thought, would have greater chances of being admitted to the European society of states if it simply followed Greece.

Turkey's strong aspirations to be a participant in the integration process in Europe were not prompted, in short, by either economic reasons or by rivalry with Greece. Rather, the application was in continuity with the sweeping reforms of 1920s and 1930s, led by Atatürk, when the young republic adopted,



among other things, the European alphabet, European calendar, even a compulsory European style of clothing for the people, as part of the “cultural revolution” that defined the early modern Turkey. That is, Turkey seeking a future in Europe, as projected in 1959, was of the fabric of the top-down cultural transformation of the earlier era, hailed by Kemalists as the golden age that should set the norms for all times. The irony, of course, is that the earlier pastiche of a European identity is precisely the dynamic behind what seems to be an overhaul of the configuration of power in the country presently.