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THE PROBLEM OF POLITICAL OPPOSITION IN TURKEY

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Turkey is a country in search of an opposition. In a country in which two major parties share 97% of the seats –of which 65% belong to the governing party- and which is moving towards a polarized system, the search for opposition acquires added significance. In this article, I will first try to give a brief summary of the structural aspects of the political opposition in Turkey. Secondly, I will focus on the current situation in Turkey and the conditions leading to the search for a dissenting political body. Finally, I will speculate about the nature of opposition-to-become in Turkey and the consequences of its failure to appear.

The structural peculiarities

The political structure of Turkey has long been analyzed with the help of a concept that has been developed in the 1970s. Accordingly, the key to understanding Turkish politics was the relation between the ‘center’ and the ‘periphery’ whereby the former represented the reforming elite and its social coalition and the latter, the people in general inclusive of the provincial forces. In this context, the basic idiosyncrasy of Turkish politics derives from the condition of what might be called the ‘historical bloc’, comprising of the military, the bureaucracy and the intellectuals. Although the composition as well as the conglomeration and concentration of the block varied in the course of Republican history, it has still remained as the basic determinant of power throughout that time and shaped Turkish modernization. The model derived from this aims at a top-down, controlled, hegemonic transformation of the state and, more importantly, of society. The over all transformation makes two components imperative; namely, secularization and westernization. Kemalism, as it usually referred to as in the relevant literature, is the ideological substructure and all encompassing discourse of this model. On the other hand, the RPP (Republican Peoples’ Party) is the political instrument of this political project. RPP stayed in power between 1923 and 1950 demarcating the iron fist of the ‘center’.

From center to periphery

With the first fair and open elections that took place in 1950 that transferred power to the opposition Democrat Party (DP) founded and led by former RPP members, a tremendous and shocking change, first political then social, took place. This was the upsurge of the 'periphery'. In the following half of the past century, this part of the population, which had been defined loosely as 'the people' (volk) stayed in power through a number of its representative political parties. The center highlighted the importance of the state, remained attached to the modernization models of the late 19th century and went for what could be identified as 'passive modernization', meaning the radical and comprehensive transformation of the legal system at large. The other side defended the technological, substructural and economic transformations. Growth and development policies are the basic peculiarities of this side. It should also be noted that the peripheral powers in Turkey guarded their traditional values and norms and in this sense they have positioned themselves as a conservative bloc set against the radicalism of the historical bloc. This side also defends a certain model of 'alternative modernity' against the pure Westernization of the country. Religion and the meaning attributed to it here play a crucial role in occasionally bringing forth the tension between the army and the civilian actors.

The left and the right

Despite its extended period in power, the center in Turkey is strangely treated as the 'opposition'. Especially the army's position and the historical weight of Kemalism create this relativistic characteristic. From a different perspective, as the RPP positioned itself in the 'left-of-center' in the mid-1960s and later referred to itself as a 'democratic left' party, the periphery was ipso facto placed on the 'right' of the political spectrum. The center was, thus, acknowledged as 'left' and the periphery 'right'.

This short history takes the students of Turkish politics to a critical and strange threshold: the masses or preferably the sociological down-scaled groups in Turkey are associated with and support the political right and the urban actors and economically up-scaled groups are represented by the political left. Today's ruling party, the JDP (Justice and Development Part) is also a party of the right. Its primary reference is once again to development and has been backed by the periphery. The present day meaning of this concept covers not only the rural and backward areas of the provinces but also the peripheries of metropolitan settlements. However the main structural aspects remain untouched, as sociological field research showed. There are two strong peculiarities of these groups: i) economically insufficient means, and ii) in need of fast modernization namely a strong will for unification with the center. These lead us to the following final conclusion.

The political right in Turkey signifies the tension and even the clash between the state and society. Since the center evidently denotes the state, the periphery absorbs the society. In a political tradition in which there is no civil society formation in the Western model and all is left to the will of an omnipotent state this differentiation becomes significant. The Turkish modernization process, as explained before, is also an outcome of this configuration and the conservatism of the political right in a sense presents itself as a kind of opposition to the state led model. The Turkish Republic that was founded in 1923 and that continued the process of reformation that began in the 19th Century has tried to bring out and solidify a contractual approach regulating the relations between the two parties. It did so by using the overwhelming power of the state. In this context political right was inevitably identified with 'democracy' whereas the political left was stuck being appreciated as more authoritarian.

What is opposition in Turkey?

In the light of the foregoing analysis, it might be appropriate to say that in Turkey strangely, the concept of opposition, tacitly, has two specific meanings. On the one hand it implies the counter-interaction with the state, in general. And in this sense the political right, even though it is the ideology in power is considered as the opposing force against the authoritarian modernist ideology, i.e. Kemalism. On the other hand, over the course of the last thirty years, the distribution of votes, has stayed more or less constant: approximately 30-35% for the left and 65-70% for the right. The block of 70% has never been under the control of a single party. It is often shared between at least two parties. Beginning with the 1970s these parties had defended opposing and even conflicting opinions although they emerged from the same source. The differing element was the emphasis put on the political and social meaning of religion. For a very long time Turkish political Islam has been in friction with center-right parties who relied on urban voters. The profound social mobilization witnessed in the 1980s and the rise of identity politics as well as the transition to 'soft' post-nation state that facilitated a severe critique of hegemonic secular policies gave political Islam the opening it needed. These forces and the upheaval they caused brought the policies of those adhering to Islam in harmony with the demands and aspirations of large masses located in the periphery of urban areas. In the early 21st Century the political shortcomings concretized in rampant corruption, economic crises due to insufficient management, intra-party conflicts brought not only the erosion of the power of the existing center-right establishment but also the rise of the masses that flocked to the then recently formed JDP.

Can Islam be the opposition?

At the beginning of the new century, therefore, Turkey has reached a serious point of decision. A country long attached to the values of the West was now in the position of bringing an Islamist oriented party, that defined itself as a democratic conservative one, to power. This development signified two important characteristics: that conservatism was being favored openly by large masses and that there was an urgent need for democratization at different levels and in many dimensions of social and political life.

To begin with the latter criteria, democracy, in its full meaning could not be delayed any further. In a country shattered with a civil war, usually referred as low intensity conflict, between the army and the Kurdish militia and that faced the reality of identity politics, democracy as a wide spanning goal encompassing both religious and ethnic issues would mean more than its limited electoral meaning. This urgency for a democratic transformation was also a function of the effects of globalization. Demands regarding the rule of law, the imperative of human rights and a new contractual mode between the state and the citizen all contributed to a democratic transformation. On the other hand Turkey's relations with the EU were at a crossroads. The will to be a full member of this large entity that frequently raised opposition to and doubts over Turkey's 'European identity', triggered a nationalist reaction that preferred an introverted, closed foreign policy. Another serious issue was civil-military relations. Many expected the army to once again intervene in politics since the controversy over veiling and its visibility in the public sphere in particular took a new turn soon after JDP's assumption of power. The speaker of the parliament took his veiled wife to a ceremony and this started a heated debate and a tension between the two protagonists, the army and the Islamists. The unending debates about the head covering of female university students contributed to this problem as the status of special (vocational) schools organized for the training of religious

leaders (Imam) and preachers (Hatip) did. The government insisted on equalizing the status of these schools with that of the secular secondary education institutions (lycees). It also pushed hard to let these schools join the mainstream by allowing their graduates to take the centralized university entrance exam without any restrictions as to which departments they could be placed in. Not surprisingly such moves further fueled the ongoing dispute.

The 'new' opposition: EU

These conditions soon prompted the JDP to champion the EU process and to use its overwhelming parliamentary majority to enact the laws necessary for EU harmonization. This effort doubtlessly brought about one of the most important legal transformations in Turkey since the 1840s. Particularly the laws regulating civil-military relations that would recast the role of the army within body politic, that is, to place it under the authority of the civilian government constituted the most critical challenge of this long process. Mention ought to be made of two historical events in this period. One is the new stage of the relations with the EU. By December 17, Turkey reached a new position and got a date from the EU to start accession negotiations in October 2005. The second is the new phase that Turkey-USA relations have reached. On March 1st 2003 the Turkish Parliament rejected the decree that would allow the deployment of American troops in Turkey to open a northern front against Iraq. Thereupon Washington started to develop a new more negative stance in its policy towards Turkey. However this negativism has primarily been towards the army and to a certain extent to RPP that vehemently opposed the decree. Nevertheless it might be said that USA was not happy with JDP either as even though the high administrative ranks were for the decree to be issued by the parliament still rejection happened by the support supplied by JDP members.

Following the December 17 decision by the EU, the government appeared to have slowed down the transformation process geared towards full membership with EU. It was also unable to improve relations with the US either. The hesitant posture of the JDP government triggered a new debate about Turkey's needs for a strong opposition. But those who take a deeper look would see that the proper term for this debate is not 'opposition' but 'alternative', which entails a very intentional approach. This distinction will frame the last argument of this article.

Not the opposition but an alternative...

Recalling the opinion put forward previously in this article and the situation in Turkey described above, it is not easy at first sight to understand why there is such an urgent need for an opposition in Turkey. I argue at this point that what is being sought after, is not a real opposition but an alternative to the existing government and there is a wide difference and gap between these two concepts. To understand the difference one needs to know that today's all sweeping debate to form an alternative came in the wake of a realization that the main opposition party in parliament, the RPP, is dysfunctional. The RPP defines itself as a social democratic party. Yet its record makes it quite clear that, to the contrary, it progressively became a more state-oriented, nationalistic and introverted party. Its electoral base does not include the large masses now voting for the JDP. Its base of support consists of urban elites, middle classes and voters over 40 years of age. On the other hand in Turkey there is an ever-widening group of people living close to poverty and/or under the official poverty line getting poor education, in need of social security. Risking repetition I should underscore once again the fact that all these social actors vote for parties to the right of the political spectrum in Turkey ranging from the center right to radical and nationalistic ones creating a strange and

unique case. The inability of the center left to appeal to these groups that usually and categorically vote for this ideology in the West, contributes to this bizarre condition.

In the last few months under the impact of two specific developments Turkey accelerated the search for the aforementioned alternative. The first one is the general impression that the center left in Turkey is continuously losing support from the masses as polls have shown. The unending and barren intra-party splits in the RPP contributed to this fading away of power and thereby produced a sizable gap in political life. As a result, the masses are left 'in the hands' of rightist parties, where an Islamic-origin party represents this bloc and its ideological position builds political tension. In addition to this, the slowing down of JDP in both domestic and foreign affairs and its continuously worsening relations with both the USA and the EU in the post- December 17 period further add to the ongoing search process. There is still one final point. It is a well-known phenomenon observed in different cases that in countries where there is either a sharp process of depolitization or when the political realm is strictly controlled by one single ideology or party there emerges a nationalist upsurge and this is the case in Turkey today.

Where to situate the left as opposition

There is a condition specific to Turkey in this context. Turkey with all these issues would/should probably have gone for a left opposition party, but such is not the case. To the contrary most observers are convinced that the search is for a center right party, in the model of the 1960s and the 1980s, when the Justice Party of former president Demirel or the Motherland party of the late president Ozal respectively ruled the country. Both of these parties came from a conservative background but they were Westernists and modernizers. They never questioned the basic assumptions of the Kemalist system and always tried to mobilize the urban masses though they relied on provincial constituencies. They enjoyed good relations with the military, always used a moderate discourse regarding religious affairs. The 'new alternative' is a search for such a party. In the second half of 2005 the focus of political activity will almost certainly shift to this search. The policy makers in Turkey are even tying the future of Turkey's relations with the EU and the USA to this condition.

The elements of a real opposition

Looking from a wider angle the leftist potential in Turkey deserves to be scrutinized. The long period of continuous application of neo-liberal economic policies ended up with large privatizations including that of the social security system. As a result the masses confront many problems, are facing impoverishment of crisis proportions, amazingly unequal income distribution and educational system shortcomings. Furthermore, economic stability is constantly on the verge of a new crisis. Regional inequality is at its peak. Immigration continues to be a problem. National health system, even after recent regulations and precautions taken, is a detrimental and colossal dead-end. The judiciary is obviously wanting. Army is seen as the most trustable institution in the country. More than half the population is under 20 and in need of proper education or new jobs whereas unemployment is getting larger. Women are facing incredible negativities like violence, gender segregation, and brutal oppression. Identity problems as a side effect of democratic inadequacies are abundant and unattended to. Human rights violations are frequently mentioned in international reports. Freedom of expression is under strict rules and control. As a result of the national threshold in the election system at 10%, fully 45% of the electorate is not represented in the parliament. Party closing is still a frequently used method of dealing with political opposition. The ethnic

and religious minorities are facing serious problems. In short, the four cracks of crisis, the state, laicism, legitimacy and modernity require to be solved in a participatory democratic understanding.

Conclusion

All these negative factors show that Turkey is in need of a new political structure. To avoid further catastrophic developments Turkey also needs a strong opposition policy based on the left. Social democracy in Turkey in this context should be redefined. Instead of fielding state oriented parties it should formulate an ideology and policy that would be backed by the masses. Unless these steps are taken it will not be a surprise for Turkey's predicament to worsen at a critical juncture in world politics and in its geo-strategic position.

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