

Civil Liberties in the Throes of Turkish Authoritarianism

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Objectivity in political analysis is a luxury often claimed, but rarely earned. Governments, no matter how responsive to public demands, often fall short of the people's expectations and are, therefore, not immune to criticism by the public, the media, or the venomous stings of their political opponents. This is why our analysis must, of necessity, be prefixed with a philosophical perspective on human nature in governance as we identify the oscillating trends between democracy and authoritarianism in Turkey.

We often act as the defendants of our own actions while constantly judging the deeds of others. This gravitational force results in sanctimonious complacency and, at times, holier-than-thou indignation, keeping our perception fogged and our beliefs befuddled. Occasionally, we inquire within to

see if we have striven enough to meet the ideals of our ideas.

Nuanced poetic parlance refuses to be anchored to syntactical constraints or phonemic formalities. It thus helps us color our reasoned thoughts with intuitions, measuring the severity of the perpetual unfurling of our human tragedy. The wondering soul in search of the self seems lost in the thronged landscape of faces aged by suffering—faces masking identities that can no longer discern and discriminate between reason and rhyme.

We come together to manage our affairs in governance. We bridge the divide between the government and the governed by establishing institutions responsive to common concerns. We add a dash of *demos* to the mix to legitimate our government's claim to representation of being of, for, and, by the people.

But more often than not these structures lose the substance they

were meant to contain. Dramas are staged in the market place of legislated demagoguery where political clowns entertain the perplexed public in the circus of circumstance, where puzzled perceptions result from manufactured consent, and where carefully choreographed chronicles called popular elections allow political pundits to bid on our souls. In astonishment we watch those holding the reins of power exploit the naiveté of the misinformed electorate who willingly renounce their rights and liberties.

In the public eye the strength of a polity is measured by its level of legitimacy and the degree of trust people have placed in their government. For this purpose, governments mobilize their populace around causes of common concern—economic, social, political, and otherwise. In that sense, a government depends on grassroots support to implement policy. Successful leaders always

(Left and below) Gezi Park protests in Istanbul, Turkey, June 1, 2013.



stay just one step ahead of those they lead so their followers can walk in their leader's shadow. The leaders stay connected so they can read the pulse of public approval to make sure they deserve to be followed.

In these trying times, such ideals are frequently perceived more in the realm of a desired dream than in the doldrums of a frustrated lived reality. The world is swept by a plague of super-nationalism, neo-fascism, and culturally cloaked terrorism. It's led by bigots, goofballs, and unashamedly outspoken dictators who have hijacked democracies and religious traditions, or both. In essence, their rise to power questions the validity of cultural and human

evolution as they attempt to normalize the abnormal. As heads of state, they cheerlead crowds to hate the other; misogyny is celebrated, and democratic principles, institutions, and traditions are thrashed to glorify nationalism—a reminder of the days not too long ago when the fever and fervor of fascism bathed the human race in blood.

There are, however, a few bright stars like Justin Pierre James Trudeau of Canada and Angela Merkel of Germany who carry the torch of the likes of José Alberto "Pepe" Mujica Cordano of Uruguay, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela of South Africa, Václav Havel of the Czech Republic, and Óscar Arias Sánchez of Costa Rica. They

help keep our hopes alive for humanity's brighter tomorrows.

And then there is the mixed bag of leaders sitting on the fence and sticking their fingers in the air trying to decide which way to go. A case in point is Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the President of Turkey.

In or about 2001, two parallel and positive trendsetters arrived on the political stage of the Turkish polity: one sported the mantle of political authority in the name of the Justice and Development Party or AKP; the other was the spiritually inspired Hizmet movement, which modeled a prophetic tradition of service through social mobilization. Through what could convincingly qualify as a renaiss-

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Hizmet Movement opened thousands of schools around the world and developed projects to promote education, dialogue, and peaceful coexistence.

sance, these two entities, among other informal ones, followed independent, but parallel paths to success.

Domestically, the governing and the governed strove for an even more levelheaded approach in bridging the gap between the rural countryside and urban centers, enabling the Turkish government to reach and relate to the concerns of a broader spectrum of the populace. They made a serious effort to bring ethnic minorities into the fold. The government achieved great economic success in raising the living standards of a wide range of the underprivileged and boasted of persistently impressive GNP growth. The government enjoyed a comfortable lead over the opposition and broadening support among the grassroots. Most importantly it successfully wrestled with authoritarian tendencies in some by putting an end to the sequence and sequel of intermittent military interventions that have dotted Turkey's past. The rule of law and the Constitution were respected. Against all odds, this became the new norm.

Regionally, the AKP as a political party and Hizmet as a spiritually inspired social movement presented a practical post-modern Islamist approach to politics, exemplifying political reform and lessening economic disparities. The AKP presented a successful role model for the neighboring Muslim-majority countries as it championed humanitarian causes and paid heed to the regional concerns of the Muslim *ummah* in general. It pursued a constructive rapprochement with the political power centers in the Muslim world. It showed calculated assertiveness in critical political crises vis-à-vis the West, and it proposed bold initiatives vis-à-vis the European community and Turkey's role and/or prospective membership in it.

In parallel but equally successful steps, Hizmet launched a global humanitarian service movement by sending teachers, doctors, nurses, consultants, and social workers to more than 150 countries around the world. More importantly, Hizmet volunteers exemplified their dedication to

humanity's dire concerns by serving in high-risk war zones and troubled spots around the world. They revamped and enhanced Turkey's Islamic spiritual identity and presented it to the world in a new light.

All of this was achieved by ending the decades-long Kemalist secularist order through an effective mobilization of a wide spectrum of Turkey's political opposition, including the considerably large conservative masses as well as liberals, business owners, and celebrities, but more importantly the faith-based communities, such as the Gülen-inspired Hizmet movement.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's role in this political drama was that of the right man at the right time and place. In 2001, when the country was facing a financial crisis, Erdoğan soared to power on the wings of high expectations for political change that paved the way for the AKP's parliamentary election sweep in 2002. Equally important was Erdoğan's pragmatic approach to the core issues of governance in Turkey, i.e. moderating his previous political Islamist stances and prioritizing Turkey's accession to the European Union.

Unfortunately, this unspoken alliance, or more correctly put, commonality of objectives between AKP and the many liberal sectors of the Turkish polity, including the Hizmet movement, did not last. It is said that in governance sustaining progress is more important than achieving it in the first place. For Prime Minister Erdoğan, the euphoria of a long list of achievements was interrupted by the corruption probes of December 2013, which implicated higher-ups in his inner circle in a money laundering scheme.

When the defiant Erdoğan tried to pull the wool over his critics' eyes, some in the broader collation, including the Hizmet

movement, did not align themselves with his authoritarian tendencies, and an irreparable fissure developed in the upper echelons of Turkish politics. Erdoğan's false sense of indignation targeted Fethullah Gülen and the Hizmet movement, becoming the metaphorical trope of a monster that eats its own children.

Had Prime Minister Erdoğan stayed fully engaged in the pursuit of a broader national agenda rather than gravitating towards party politics, the streak of successes would mostly likely have continued. Needless to say, for the AKP the paradigm of power politics had shifted. The government's defiance began to trend towards systemic power consolidation in the person of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. This was institutionalized in several stages:

- Restrictions on term limitations were by-passed through a round of musical chairs, a la Putin's Russia, between the office of the prime minister and that of the president.
- A coup was staged as a media blitz to implicate the government's critic, Fethullah Gülen, and his affiliate, the Hizmet movement.
- These acrobatics were used as a pretext to launch what became known as the Turkish purge, firing some 150,000 allegedly Hizmet-affiliated civil servants, imprisoning nearly 50,000 others, confiscating their properties through the closure of their businesses, schools, media syndicates, and press and publication outlets.
- Erdoğan's propaganda machine and his global intelligence network continued to wreak havoc in Turkish communities at home and abroad.

In this manner Erdoğan began to build the mystique of invulnerability around himself under the pretentious cloak of Islam. He also



Strasbourg, France - June 25, 2016: Members of Turkey's Alevi community protesting Erdoğan

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distanced himself from the people and the ideals that helped the AKP rise to power.

Regression in the political evolution of any society is regrettable, but it is even more so in the case of Turkey for the following reasons:

A. Turkey may be seen as a bridge between the East and the West, but recently it has played an

even more significant role in offering an alternative to the regressive and repressive authoritarian regimes in the region that feed on religious fanaticism branded as "Islamic."

B. When the AKP was perceived as able to discern between good and evil, this shattered the stereotype of Islam's in-



compatibility with democracy and modernity.

- C. The failure of this forward-looking, practical, and pragmatic regime may well dash the vested hopes of millions of Muslims who are looking for a modern alternative.
- D. The Hizmet movement offered the world community the true peaceful nature of Islam that was cut from the same scriptural block, but sculpted to face today's revisionist reality while defiantly marching ahead as it shattered stereotypes of cultural relativism. In essence,

Hizmet presented a view from the other side as it harkened to the past glory when Islam was the civil and civilizational alternative instead of the violence-prone monstrosity it is being unfairly associated today due to the deliberately frustrated political and social concerns that remain unaddressed in today's Muslim society.

Turkey as an island of stability could sustain some jolts in the tumultuous political landscape of the Muslim world, but its own struggles could be detrimental to the welfare of millions. By harkening to the vast knowledge and experience of past and present politics in the tradition of Muslim political thinkers such as chronicled in Nizam al-Mulk's *Siyasat-namah* or Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali's *Nasihat al-muluk*, the current political impasse in Turkish politics could be resolved, as seen through these snippets:

1. Political repression weakens the state, de-legitimizes political dissent, and often radicalizes a moderate opposition.
2. The inability and unwillingness of a political leadership to reach out to those with whom they differ denies a government viable policy alternatives and drives people to extremism.
3. Denying those who follow the law the opportunity to be involved in politics is a hindrance to the democratization of a society. There are many examples of legitimate, law-abiding organizations that have been unfairly excluded from the political process.
4. Muffling the voices of conscience in the nascent free media in the Muslim world, such as the closure of *Zaman* and the threats to *Al-Jazeera*, takes away alternatives to the dominant corporate Western media.

These miscalculations subject the Muslim world to a double tyranny: the suppression of its own governments and the aggression of a global imperial overreach. It is the radicalized Islam that is often supported, armed, and financed by some powers that welcome every excuse for interference and intervention, with the ultimate goal of war profiteering and wealth accumulation. Thus, corrupt and corrupting leaders, intentionally or otherwise, do the bidding of the global militarism.

The old adage applies here: "When the mirror reflects your flaws, correct your deficiency, but don't break the mirror." In the height of hubris, many leaders lose that capacity and they often undo the many good deeds they've done or still plan to do. Will there be a day when leaders faced with some ugly reality can, through a deeper sense of self-awareness, rectify their own behavior, negotiate the treacherous turns in the uncharted turbulent waters, and navigate their way to safe shores instead of drowning themselves?

Such a wishful hypothetical makes a demand on us to see that a democracy is only as good as the degree of its citizens' awareness. The present reality asks whether we, the citizens of this interconnected global community, can remain fully conscious and aware. The global trend of governments deliberately confusing their citizenry through "fake news" makes our democracies even more fake, along with the governments and those that are at the helm. The 21st century challenge for us is how to outmaneuver the government propaganda and brainwashing intended to make us think that what is good for them is actually good for us, when in reality, the befuddled citizenry often votes against its own interests, undermining the people part of the "of, for, and by" of our democracies. ▲