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**DEPLETED DEMOCRACY AND LIBERAL
DOWNFALL- THE STATE OF CURRENT
TURKISH AFFAIRS**

Abstract

Turkey has traditionally nurtured the idea of strong state (Barkey, 2000; Heper, 1985; 1992) with a unique political culture whose *raison d'être* is protection of the key features of Turkish national identity and Turkish territorial integrity. The venture is conscious and cyclically elitist (Abadan-Unat, 1982; Rabasa and Larrabee, 2008) by essence because it involves the rise and continuous existence of elite that dictates the political discourse and reform and modernization processes throughout the imperial era but also in modern times. Turkey is significant since it is the only secular democracy in the Islamic dominion. Furthermore, it is a capitalist country with developed and functional market economy and it is the foremost liaison between the East and the West. Lastly, Turkey is a candidate country for EU membership.

Turkish democracy, commonly described as fragile, is in need of democratization or to be exact in need of completing the process of democratic consolidation (Lowell 2009). The quest for democratization according to Lowell has become a continuous and repetitive endeavor and bespoken standpoint of all Turkish political elites since the establishment of the Republic, although not with the same degree of a dedication and same amount of popular consent. Therefore, it can be argued that the consolidation of democracy in Turkey is an ongoing process.

Conversely, articulation on democratic Turkey in terms of free and competitive elections, political pluralism and democratic practices and institutions is promising, but the discourse on liberal values and performance is questionable. The main argument put forward by this paper is that Turkey is suffering from the depleted democracy syndrome and that the current state of affairs is related to the Turkish liberal downfall. The research offers an outlook of preceding practices and maturity of Turkish democracy whilst current developments and turmoil regarding the Justice and development party (JDP) rule and its policies.

Key words: Turkey, democracy, liberalism, Islamism, Secularism

INTRODUCTORY NOTES

Turkey has traditionally nurtured the idea of strong state (Barkey, 2000; Heper, 1985; 1992) with a unique political culture whose *raison d'être* is protection of the key features of Turkish national identity and Turkish territorial integrity. The venture is conscious and cyclically elitist (Abadan-Unat, 1982; Rabasa and Larrabee, 2008) by essence because it involves the rise and continuous existence of elite that dictates the political discourse and reform and modernization processes throughout the imperial era but also in modern times.

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DEMOCRACY “ALLA TURCA”

The Turkish political history has been extremely turbulent. If one studies the first years of pluralism, which was induced just after the WWII, one might notice that it is equally turbulent today. Although definite progress has been made, the controversies that firstly sparked the debate, on the compatibility of Islam and democracy and/or its supremacy, remain strong as ever.

Over the past six decades, Turkey has managed to establish and develop formal institutions of democracy (including some that ought to be questioned, such as

the Diyanet). These institutions have become part of the state system and despite frequent hindrance from various actors and reasons (military interventions, reforms aimed at modernization, europeanization reforms and European integration process, and so forth) they are strong and reasonably healthy. The democratization is an ongoing process and some elements of the system are still underdeveloped or not matured enough. Such is the mediascape of Turkey which was in reality recognized after the state monopoly of radio and television broadcasts was abolished with the 1993 constitutional amendment.

The Turkish model of democracy is marked by four major and complementing processes: a) pluralism - established after the WWII and abandoned in several occasions, but remaining as a characteristic element of Turkish society in which the pro-Islamic option is successfully competing in the political arena; b) parliamentarism - originally practiced since 1876 and though its reign has been interrupted by military coups it is still strongly rooted in Turkish political culture; c) modernization - part of the imperial heritage, one of the basic principles of Kemalism-republican state doctrine, and principal component of europeanization process in modern times and d) laicism/secularism - largely valued and greatly disputed institute of republican Turkey and the ontological denominator of modern Turkish identity.

The most prominent feature of the model is laicism/secularism. Laicism was initially developed in Ottoman era under the influence of ideas such as liberalism and nationalism that were imported from the West. The intriguing part of the debate on Turkish secularism is related to the non-existing neutrality and independence from the state interference in religious issues, but rather strict control and state assistance and even state intervention in the content of religion (Netherlands Scientific Council, 2004). The intrusion from the state in executive and financial matters is exercised by the Diyanet (Directorate of religious affairs - Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı) that has wide-ranging powers including the management of mosques, appointment of preachers, religious education in the spirit of Sunni Islam and so forth. Formally established in 1961, the Diyanet has replaced the seyhulislam – the highest religious legal advisor in Ottoman empire and in 1981 it was constitutionally entrusted, by an amendment of the Constitution, to protect the Turkish national identity (Netherlands Scientific Council 2004). Turkish secularism is aimed at preserving the Sunni Islam as dominant religion and is continuously and strongly supported by subsequent governments ever since 1924. As a result of the fear from revival of Islamism in Turkey, its secularism has gone deeper than what usually is seen in secular societies. Some even claim that the idea is almost inverse of a theocratic state and that Islam appears to be subordinated to the state, because Turkey is exercising too strict control over religious matters (Netherlands Scientific Council, 2004).

The Turkish political system has been fashioned despite ethnic and religious cleavages that reflect political struggles and antagonisms. Moreover, the diversification runs deep and the level of social polarization has become sharpened to the extent that Turkey can without doubt be labeled as divided society with low degree of trust and cooperation and under enduring risk of social and religious segregation mainly by the Kurdish and Alevi population.

The model is customarily named as “alla turca” democracy. It is a sui generis model in political theory and its features attract much deliberation in academia and in popular debates as well.

LIMITS OF TURKISH DEMOCRACY

One of the probably most persistent features of Turkish political culture is the notion that incumbents have the prerogative and capability to shape the society as they consider suitable. It is in fact a particular state tradition (Heper, 1985) that overwhelms Turkish society ever since the Ottoman times. The heritage incorporates massive and strong bureaucratic structure and subjective and obedient political culture of the citizens that are most likely to abide then to question decision-making thus producing weak, fearful and politically passive citizenry. During the first years of the Republic, this notion was put into force so the elite of the time could push for sweeping reforms and modernization of the society or state-building process along with the nation-building project that was to unite various groups and their diverse interests towards the singular ideal of Turkishness (Armstrong, 2015). In recent times the notion was used by JDP to cultivate a tremendously devout population. Yet, the success of the state engineering project has been questioned in many occasions and it is connected to the differentiation between omnipotent and monolithic state or bureaucracy and an equally undifferentiated and potentially hostile society against which the state operated (Lamprou, 2015). Lamprou deducts that the result of this rendering is an overestimation of the role, power and domination of an omniscient and omnipotent state over a passive society.

The limits of Turkish democracy are also related to two outstanding practices: military intervention in civil matters and persecution of the opposition. Both of them have tested Turkey’s democratic capacity to extremes.

The civil – military relations in Turkey have dominated much of its Republican era. The military intervened in civil matters when Turkish politics was threatened by fragmentation, polarization and economic instability. There where three military coups (1960, 1971, 1980) and one “post modern” coup (1997) over Turkey’s multiparty period. The military officers conducted the interventions in the

framework of their vow to protect Turkey from the enemies within and without with a clear doctrine of modernization and a secularizing mission (Yavuz, 2009) or to put it simply it was seen as their professional obligation to intervene whenever the civilian politicians had made too great a mess of things (Szarejko, 2014; Findley, 2010). Since 2002, the military's influence on civilian matters has decreased due to the reforms undertaken by JDP. The relationship is still troubled (the Sledgehammer plot of 2010) and although the military is able to show discontent with the state of affairs, the policy making is in the hand of civilians (Szarejko, 2014).

The persistent policy on restrictions of political parties was practiced towards a vast ideological parcel that included the leftist, the pro-Islamic and the pro-Kurdish political parties. The instrument that utilized this control is the nationwide 10 % election threshold and it proved as no easy task for a political party to survive under that condition (Carkoglu and Kalaycioglu, 2007). It is still in force and it is the highest representation threshold in the world.

LIBERALISM “ALLA TURCA”

Fukuyama claimed that a country can be democratic without being liberal (Fukuyama, 1994). Zakaria furthered this argument by noting that liberal democracy is a relatively new phenomenon (only several decades old) of the West where democracy and liberty have merged (Zakaria, 2004). Fukuyama proclaimed the end of history with the triumph of the liberal idea over all other. Zakaria asserted that although the world is becoming increasingly democratic, illiberal democracy can be found all over the world, even in the most developed countries in the world. The reason, according to him, is linked to the bundle of freedoms termed as constitutional liberalism (the rule of law, separation of powers, and protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion and property) that has nothing intrinsically to do with democracy and the two have not always gone together, even in the West. Basically, Zakaria described democracy as procedures for selecting government and constitutional liberalism as government's goals.

Liberal democracy has two dimensions: horizontal – which corresponds to participation and vertical – which is defined by the limits of what can be included in the public sphere (Heper and Landau, 1991). In relation to issues that seem to dominate the Turkish political discourse hence derive the arguments about Turkey's depleted democracy. In reality, though some may challenge this argument, democracy in Turkey in all probability is not in danger of contest by other concepts and ideas. What can be disputed is its account. An analysis of Turkey's modern political rhetoric would inevitably show that the issue at hand is not the spiritual

induction in political affairs but the nuance offered by sharply diverse political elites and their vision of Turkey's prospects.

The current state of affairs in Turkey is commonly seen as a clash of the secular and pro-Islamic political option. This oversimplification is typically present at home and abroad, but the issue is more daring since it involves power struggle of the new and emerging elite and the old secularized elite or struggle between the center and the periphery which has deep roots back in Ottoman political history (Rabasa and Larrabee, 2008). Furthermore, this is not a novelty for Turkish politics. The democratization of Turkey especially after the 1980s has conveyed the forgotten and banned ideology of political Islam back to the plural political arena.

Turkey under Erdogan managed to move closer to the EU like never before. Despite the fact that many (the military, but also part of the civilian mainly secular establishment in Turkey) perceived the victory of JDP in 2002 as a shift towards the Islamization of Turkey and return of the political Islam at the Turkish political arena, Erdogan moved towards securing a firm date for the beginning of negotiations on accession to the EU which some label as a shrewd move (Mango, 2004). It was in fact an immensely twisted game – he was hunting the support of the military and the secular class which saw the move as a logical continuance of the republican imagery and secular principles foreseen in 1923 on one hand. He was aiming for EU approval and backing to deal with the military and to further democratization of Turkey in his vision, on the other hand. At first the military seemed soundless. The majority of people were agreeably supportive whereas the secularists remained reluctant. Soon the dominance of JDP overwhelmed the public sphere and the military was stripped from power, able only to occasionally show discontent with the state of affairs since the days when it could easily dispose civilian government were over (Szarejko, 2014).

The arguments proposed by the supporters of JDP often describe Turkey under Erdogan as society with expanded freedom and prosperity and consider the Turkish experiment as a real path towards Muslim liberty and JDP's reign as retrieval of Islamic liberalism (Akyol, 2011).

LIBERAL DOWNFALL

The main attribute of the Turkish model of democracy is the poor or more precisely depleted account in respect of the core principles of liberalism. Turkey's domestic political context is complicated by the internal confrontation between political options, the civil war and the issue of Kurdish minority rights despite the "Kurdish opening" from 2009, the secularism and related affairs, the problems with

media freedoms and freedom of expression in general, and so forth.

Turkey's liberal downfall is a complex episode incorporating a multitude of problems, government policies, civilian responses and issues, including: JDP's attempt to criminalize adultery, the headgear debate, the "KCK" trials in Kurdish regions, the investigation into the activities of the extremely marginal leftist armed group "Revolutionary Headquarters", the Constitutional referendums in 2007 and 2010 on electoral reform and other issues, the attempt to Putinize Turkey's presidential office by amending the constitution to introduce presidential/semi presidential system, the Ergenekon investigations and trials, operation Sledgehammer from 2010, state control over the media and internet in particular, the clash between JDP/Erdogan and Fethullah Gulen, several corruption scandals (2013 corruption scandal involving high rank members of JDP and the 2014 National Intelligence Organization scandal named MIT Lorries), reaching the top of the charts of leading nations in terms of the number of journalists in jail in 2012 and 2013, and second place in 2014, the Gezi park protests – as the one of most important events in modern Turkish history.

The critics of JDP's rule often state that the promise and program of the party, during the election campaign prior 2002 elections were quite liberal and progressive compared to its opponents and incumbents, but turned out as narrative with cynical ending. In fact, Erdogan even spoke of LGBT rights but once in power he promoted soft and permissive attitude towards Islamism which stands firmly against it.

Rabasa and Larrabee elaborate that the growing strength of political Islam in Turkey (or rather of politics informed by Islam) is largely related to internal factors such as democratization and socio-economic transformation of Turkey in the past decades (Rabasa and Larrabee, 2008).

Armstrong claims that the term liberal is often used as a term of abuse in Turkey and that liberalism is tragically little understood in Turkey, both by its self-declared proponents and opponents (Armstrong, 2015). Aside countless arguments that confirm this assertion there is also the issue of advocating authoritarian ideas and pursuing authoritarian goals while using democratic tools and liberal like rhetoric by the incumbents. One striking example is the endorsement of the veiling of women in institutions of the public sphere which is presented as the liberalization of the veil. According to Gole, wearing of headscarves is related not the display of traditionalism or as an expression of fundamentalism but to the issue of recognition of their Muslim identity through this symbol, in particular in the public domain (Netherlands Scientific Council, 2004). Zurcher and Van der Linden underline that this recognition is not founded in theology but in an appeal to human rights and in this case the individual right to show one's religious conviction (Netherlands Scientific Council, 2004).

Turkey's mediascape is convincingly diverse yet its realm is still under the influence of duality of political ideologies: pro-secular or pro-Islamic. In addition, the freedom of expression is being constantly suppressed by the use of repressive legislation and employment of measures that tend to eradicate difference in opinion or criticism, such as the arrests and civil pursuits of journalists, media representatives and media distributors, closure or take-over of media companies, prosecution on the grounds of tax evasion and even censorship and blockage of social media, news portals, websites, twitter accounts.

Erdogan's vision of Turkey is closely related to the project Turkey 2023 – the marking of 100 years anniversary since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. The project involves increased economic and social development and securing political stability. The latter incorporates exercise in hard power in internal and external affairs. On the domestic front he intends to put forward constitutional changes for the introduction of semi-presidential system. The attempt to settle the Kurdish problem has failed so yet again Turkey experiences civil war. The campaign to resolve the issues with his political opponents has reached a new scale after implementing numerous and vicious police actions and judicial measures against the supporters of his once close ally – Fethullah Gulen. Albeit tangible political deeds, some of the symbols and rhetoric used by this political elite include construction of the biggest airport in the world in Istanbul, construction of the biggest mosque in the world in Istanbul, the project Canal Istanbul (connecting the Black sea with the Mediterranean) and the construction of Ak Saray – probably the biggest presidential palace in the world. On the external front Erdogan changed the tune of Turkish foreign policy foremost on regional level after the Arab Spring revolts. The neo-ottomanism anticipated that Turkey will promote regional supremacy by using soft power. Instead, the recent actions on Erdogan's part attest that Turkey can't be restrained from using traditional hard power especially in the case of Syria, near-war hostility with Russia, engagement in Iraq etc. His sharp rhetoric and imprudent foreign policy actions will probably lead to grave mistakes. Accordingly his actions at home and abroad are disproving the initial optimistic views that he has learned the lessons from the past and matured on the experience of previous pro-Islamic parties, that he will restrain from imposing "majoritarian democracy" or abolish the headscarf ban in public institutions (Ahmad, 2004), that new Turkey will be erected through democratic processes and liberal practice or at least that this is a transitional period that promises to be momentous for the country as was the period between the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of the Kemalist Republic (Yavuz, 2009).

DEMOCRATICALLY ELECTED AUTHORITARIANISM?

It has been argued that “democratic politics is the bridge between the citizen and the state and that the links out of which the bridge is built are: civil liberties and political rights attributed to the individual citizen, the majority principle, political parties, elections, parliament and the state executive” (Offe, 1980). Further on, Offe asserts that the liberal democratic theory foresees that the traffic that moves over this bridge determines the uses of which state power is put. In relation to our analysis, it is important to underline that Turkey has been portrayed as a bridge in quite a few interconnected manners- bridge between the east and the West, bridge between the two great civilizations of the Christianity and Islam and certainly as a bridge between the democratic and religious canons (specifically Islamic canons). The latter is certainly the most important for this discourse as it implies that Turkey is the model that successfully reconciled the democratic principles and religious dogma and should continue to be considered as end goal of societies with an Islamic majority on their way of becoming modern and developed polities. And without a doubt it was part of the initial inspiration to many of the peoples that revolted in the surrounding region and became part of what became known as the Arab spring. Still, the success of the model has been reevaluated in light of the far-reaching evidence that Turkey is becoming more of a showcase for elected authoritarianism (Herzog, 2015), country ruled under Erdoganocracy (Zeynalov, 2014) or failed liberal-democratic experiment in society where pro-Islamism is inherent feature. The last argument is related to the impression that Erdogan’s aim is to refashion Turkey as Islamic society along lines of JDP religiously conservative ideology. Thought this reasoning may be disputed and confirmed by both camps one particularly essential argument for the endorsement of JDP’s rule can be found in Orientalists interpretation on the relationship between democracy and Islam. Namely, they state that since Islam has a totalist character (a total way of life rather than just a religion) only an absolutist government could put its precepts into practice (Hale and Ozbudun, 2010).

The outcome of latest cycle of elections (November 2015) in Turkey was described as a crossroad of Turkish politics where the dilemma between democracy and elected authoritarianism exists (Tüzün, 2015) but also as a strong confirmation on people’s approval of JDP’s policies. Needless to say, that this is not the end of the story on Turkey’s future and it is far from exhausting the debate on Turkey’s current state of affairs and its immediate challenges. A large body of analysts and commentators assert that Erdogan’s rule could be labeled as authoritarian but conclude that this is due to the manner in which he practices the political power rather than to its relation with Muslim religion as such.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Over the past decades Turkey has suffered much transformation, change and uncertainty. The recurrent turmoil and deepening polarization have been often pronounced as residues of the past or result of JDP's authoritarian rule, which is why it's imperative to underscore that Turkey's democratic and authoritarian legacies have been intertwined from the outset (Danforth, 2015) and should not be rendered as novelty. Regrettably, at the end of 2015 we must conclude that the securing of functional democracy and political liberalism in Turkey is a pending process.

Aside the debate on Turkish democratic deficit, arguments on poorly developed (even non-existing) liberalism are becoming more pronounced. They are traditionally nourished by the rule of authoritarian elites and in recent times by the pro-Islamic ideology of chief political parties and groups.

The efforts to build up a healthy democracy despite the continuing influence of authoritarian elements have dominated much of the JDP's rule since 2002 (Amani, 2015). However JDP's politics revived the discourse on Turkey's most lasting challenge – secularism or political Islam that can without difficulty be interpreted as confrontation of liberal democracy or authoritarianism. The 2015 general elections represent the latest example of this argument.

Hale and Ozbudun are correct when stating that the persistence of authoritarian regimes in the region is due to several reasons: the weakness of civil society, the co-optation of the bourgeoisie by state elites and the ruler's capacity to develop successful strategies (Hale and Ozbudun, 2010). And Turkey is not exempt from this trend.

Recent happenings in Turkey have been marked at a historic crossroad (Amani, 2015). Zeynalov makes the argument more viable in saying that Turkey will be full-fledged constitutional democracy when both secular people and Islamists finally understand that a limited lawful state is a final target and democracy is a goal not a tool (Zeynalov, 2014).

The current state of affairs in Turkey is also related to the halt in EU integration process and its influence on Turkish people's extended disappointment and even fatigue. On the other hand, Europeanization (as external incentive) can and should assist the process however most of the work needs to be conducted because of internal needs and incentives. Herzog states that Turkish politics has gradually left the asphalted path of a struggling and flawed democracy painfully attempting to consolidate itself and overcome the illiberal and military patronage legacies of the past and instead it appears to have driven off-piste into a dark and crisis-ridden future of civil authoritarian regime building and rule by domination (Herzog 2015).

Let us hope that the prospects will produce advanced/developed Turkish democracy with high respect for liberal values and stand as the model so needed

in the region where most of the peoples still struggle with authoritarian rule and suppressed freedoms.

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