Talking Turkey for democracy: Fundamentalism, fascism and the EU

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The rise of pro-Islamic politics, the eastward expansion of the EU and the invasion of Iraq have increased the Western media's interest in the only Muslim member of Nato: Turkey. Popular discussion, however, has overshadowed a lack of systematic analyses for a proper understanding of major political developments in Turkey. This paper aims to debate Turkey's state of affairs from the perspective of political economy. It will be argued that Turkey's already troubled democracy is under the threat of absolute collapse, triggered by fundamentalist and fascistic tendencies, and that the current policies of the EU nurture such processes despite the EU's pro-democratic claims.

In order to understand the current situation in Turkey, it is important to first understand that the country's troubled democracy is one characterised by growing inequality, running concurrently with the liberalisation of the economy that began in the late-1970s. Pro-market policies in agriculture, such as the lifting of tariffs for imports and mechanisation for exports, have created millions of unemployed peasants. Privatisation, automation and new management strategies have also constrained employment prospects in urban areas (Nichols et al., 1998). Consequently, by 1999 the total labour force had plunged to half of the working-age population, from three-quarters in 1978. In the same period, the proportion of shantytown dwellers had doubled to half of the total population living in cities, and the share of the lowest fifth of the population in terms of

income, nationally, had decreased by a third. Between 1978 and 1999, the real earnings of white-collar and industrial workers slumped by two-thirds and a third, respectively (Cam, 2002).

In order to repress democratic opposition to the growing inequality, the military junta that had ousted the government in 1980 rigged elections and institutionalised an oppressive regime through a new constitution, before it left power in 1983. This new constitution has given extensive powers to the National Security Council (NSC) of generals. The NSC operates as a 'preventative mechanism against threats to the regime', and its opinion on any issue regularly features as headlines in mainstream newspapers, the owners of which are usually kept satisfied by lavish loans (Heper & Demirel, 1996). Under the supervision of the NSC, the State Security Court (SSC) and the Higher Election Committee (HEC) have so far closed down several parties, and banned hundreds of 'untrustworthy' candidates from standing in elections. In 2002, a survey suggested that three-quarters of parliamentarians considered the army, together with its 'colla-borators' in the media, to be the ruler of the country (Birand, 2002).

In particular, the military constitution restricted the right to strike for blue-collar workers, and excluded white-collar workers from unionisation. Between 1978 and 1999, union density halved to 14 per cent (SIS, 1999). In 2001, nearly a quarter of the labour force was reported to have been discriminated against in recruitment, or subjected to unfair dismissal, in an attempt to prevent 'union militancy' (Ekinci, 2002). It is not possible to estimate the current number of political prisoners accurately: however, in 2002, 149,000 people were 'wanted', a quarter of whom were indicted with 'offending the regime' (*Hurriyet*, 2002). While repressing democratic opposition to growing inequality, the army has paved the way for Islamic influences, although it claims to be 'the guardian of the secular regime'.

The unholy rise of Islamic currents

In order to debilitate democratic opposition and promote neoliberalism, the military had explicitly emboldened pro-Islamic currents up until the mid-1990s. It then began to confront 'Islamist populism' in the name of secularism. However, as a way of consolidating the army's economic interests, effectively, over those of the poor, this 'confrontation'

continues to raise both electoral and militant support for the Islamists.

In addition to its oppressive policies, the army sought to divide trade unions through the organisation of an Islamic Trades Union Confederation, HAK-IS. This Islamic Confederation champions the idea of an Islamic brotherhood with employers, as opposed to conflict-oriented trade unionism. Although HAK-IS's share of total union membership was less than 7 per cent in the late-1970s, this proportion had doubled by 1998. The expansion of HAK-IS was partly due to the military's allowing this confederation alone to operate within army-owned enterprises (more on this later). It also reflected the army's support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) where, again, HAK-IS alone was permitted to organise workers. In order to promote exports, especially those to Middle-Eastern markets, the army made SMEs exempt from tax duties, and removed charges on credits for the 'interest-free trades' required by Islam. This helped SMEs' share to increase to a quarter of total exports in 1997, from residual levels in the early 1980s (Bugra, 1997). In order to gain further compensation for 'interest-free trades', however, SMEs also deployed their economic power behind the pro-Islamic Welfare Party (WP).

Even so, electoral support for pro-Islamic politics does not only stem from religious propaganda (Ayata, 1990). It feeds on the poor's frustration with mainstream parties, seen as 'hand-picked' products of the SSC and HEC that effectively keep parliament free from democratic opposition to the growing inequality, through the previously-noted restrictions on elections. The judicial establishment turned a blind eye to the pro-Islamic WP's pledges to shantytowns to 'overthrow the status quo', since the military saw Islam as a political means of 'saving the poor youth from the disease of communism'. For this reason, it supervised the creation of hundreds of religious schools. In the face of these developments, the WP raised its electoral share to one-fifth of votes in 1997, from an average of 7 per cent throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and joined the government as the major coalition partner. The generals mostly believed that the WP would lose its popularity in office, by giving up its electoral pledges under the pressure of fiscal shortfalls.

However, the party's cadres proved to be more pragmatic than the army had assumed. They permitted tariff-free car imports to citizens living abroad, for a special fee, hoping

to obtain millions of dollars in order to assist not only the poor but also the SMEs. The military dismissed this policy as 'Islamic populism to popularise fundamentalist agendas'. No less significantly, however, the tariff-free import of cars also threatened the profits of the army's OYAK car company, a joint venture with the French company Renault. Originating from a military pension fund, OYAK has become the third-largest conglomerate in the liberal era, but it pays no tax and has no legal accountability (Parla, 1998). In 1998, the NSC issued a declaration that coerced the government into stepping down. Then the WP was closed down, and financial incentives for SMEs were withdrawn.

Preventing 'Islamic populism' buffered the military's economic interests but, as a result of growing poverty, it also galvanised political support for pro-Islamic politics. In 2002, one in six Turkish people was reported to be living in danger of starvation—a situation not seen since the Great War (Boulton, 2002). A new pro-Islamic party, the Justice and Development Party (JDP), promised the poor that it would fund an employment scheme by curbing military expenditure, which accounted for 6 per cent of GDP annually. Following the general election of 2002, the JDP came to office, garnering a third of votes. However, in order to counter this likelihood, the military had already accused its leader, Tayyip Erdogan, of promoting 'religious hatred', and the State Security Court had prohibited him from participating in politics in 2000. After the elections, the military used the ban on Mr Erdogan to make a political deal with the pro-Islamic government. The army agreed not to deploy the Supreme Court to cancel constitutional changes, designed by the JDP to enable its leader to stand in the by-elections. In return, the party dropped its anti-poverty pledge.

Threats to a secular regime, on the other hand, continue to grow, as does poverty as a source of not only electoral but also militant support for pro-Islamic politics, which had long proven to be brutal in its pursuit of *sharia*, the Islamic Order. During a cultural festival in Sivas in 1993, for example, fundamentalist mobs burned alive dozens of 'infidel' poets, writers and musicians. In time, they have allied themselves with al-Qaeda and, most recently, were involved in two suicide-bomb attacks on Jewish and British targets in Istanbul, which claimed sixty lives in December 2003. Whilst failing to keep the radical grassroots under control, the JDP's high command is trying to disassociate itself from 'Islamic

terrorism', in order to remain in office 'as a reliable partner' for Western governments. For this reason, Tayyip Erdogan, who became Prime Minister after the by-elections of 2003, pragmatically declared the JDP to be a 'counterpart' of the Christian Democrats. The pro-Islamic government also passed a number of democratic reform packages, which were required by the Copenhagen Criteria as a precondition for accession talks with all candidate countries. However, the implementation of these legal reforms has been kept at bay so far, since they are treated with 'reservations' in business circles, as well as in the military.

Who fears the Copenhagen Criteria?

Turkey's entry into the European Union and its pro-democratic reforms are favoured by the majority of the public. As a response to public expectations, both MUSIAD (the association for SMEs) and TUSIAD (the association for larger businesses) threw their weight behind legal amendments and placed advertisements in the main daily newspapers in 2002. Business circles in particular argue that 'corrupt politicians should be got rid of if serious economic agendas are to be implemented' (TUSIAD, 2002). Furthermore, they have started to complain about the unfair competition created by the army's tax-free commercial companies which, in total, render the military the single largest entrepreneur. However, the businessmen's 'pro-European' campaign is handicapped by their growing dependency on anti-democratic policies toward the working class.

Lambasting corrupt politicians is largely a twisted reaction to the government's failure to deliver its capital tax-reduction promise, at the expense of the poor and of the economic foundation of democracy. The government's plans are opposed by the IMF which, contrarily, wants to raise capital taxes as a way of resolving Turkey's crisis over external debt payments—three-quarters of GDP in 2001. In fact, employers' contributions to social security and corporate taxes are so low—half the EU average, and making up just 5 per cent of GDP in 2001—that they also buttress an 'effective demand shortage' along with poverty (OECD, 2002). Capitalists become increasingly complacent about the domestic economy, whilst shifting to an outward orientation through exports and overseas investments. Between 1980 and 2001,

exports doubled to become a quarter of Turkey's GDP. To escape the economic turbulence of recent years, the business community also began to invest abroad, in sums amounting to $10bn in 2001 (Finance Bank, 2002).

Frustrated by the 'incompetence of civil politicians in curtailing tax burdens', the business community began to complain about the tax-free commercial activities of the military, in an attempt to spur the army into using its influence on the government.

However, the difficulty with such a strategy was that the commercially-reinforced strength of the army would be even more vital for business circles, in order to maintain social stability, if capital taxes were cut further. The army refused to become involved in this dispute because of a growing impression among the public that its interventions into daily politics undermine Turkey's chances of accession to the EU . Even so, the military is not prepared to give up its economic and political privileges for the sake of accession. Generals send threatening letters to columnists who criticise the army for failing to give qualified endorsement to pro-democracy reforms (Berberoglu, 2002), and whilst arguing that 'foreign-patented reforms promise unchecked freedoms not only to pro-Islamic but also pro-Kurdish movements', the military resorts to fascistic inclinations.

Fascistic inclinations

Since the liberalisation of the economy, growing economic deprivation in south-eastern Turkey has boosted sympathy amongst Kurds for the Kurdish Workers' Party's insurrectionary attempts to gain independence. At least 35,000 Kurds have lost their lives, in addition to the 5,000 soldiers conscripted from poor families (Alpay, 2002). Partly because of the chauvinist sentiment fostered by the war against the Kurds, the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (NMP) has enjoyed an upsurge in the parliamentary spectrum. The NMP's electoral share had been no more than 6 per cent on average in the 1960s and 1970s, but this share tripled in the 1998 elections, enabling it to participate in a coalition government.

The success of the far right was also evidenced in extravagant election campaigns funded by the drug trafficking of the NMP and corrupt army officers, in collaboration with

each other. Taking the opportunity to fill the 'political vacuum' in the south-east created by the war, such officers have deployed NMP mobs in order to assure the region's use as an entrance route for the transfer of heroin from Asia to Europe (OGD, 1999).

Around 80 per cent of the heroin dispersed in European markets passes through Turkey (*Economist*, 2001). Although the far-right-partnered coalition lost office to the pro-Islamic JDP after the 2002 elections, the influence of the NMP within bureaucracy continues to deepen. In the coalition government, the NMP replaced the bulk of bureaucrats with its cadres, who keep enlarging their circle with further replacements, while begging for political unification with Turkic Republics in Central Asia.

Because oil reserves in Central Asia and the Middle East have also whetted the army's appetite, expansionist inclinations have reached such a level that the country risks being classified as a 'rogue state' by the hegemonic powers of globalisation (Makovsky, 1999).

The military's ardent supporters within bureaucracy propagate the idea that Turkey would become the leading power from the Great Wall of China to the Adriatic Sea (SPO, 2000). Such posturing, viewed as 'the empire striking back', has caused concerns in the West.

The idea of Turkey's expulsion from Nato had even been entertained by Western strategists before September 11 (Sander & Hartley, 1999). Following the deployment of Turkish troops in Afghanistan, debates on this issue have subsided, but tensions remain.

Currently, the military is striving to establish a satellite Turkmen state in the oil-rich regions of northern Iraq. The army moved 80,000 soldiers to the Iraqi borders with the approval of the US, but Washington continually warns the Turkish army to stay in line with the Pentagon's directives. The military heralds its Turkmen State project as the only way to prevent the possibility of a Kurdish state in Iraq, and escalated Kurdish separatism in Turkey.

The army's mouthpieces in the media espouse 'the cause of the Turkmen State' through explicit references to 'the historical rights of the Ottoman Empire in the oil reserves of Kirkuk and Mosul' (Egilmez, 2003).

In April 2003, parliament initially rejected the proposal to send troops to Iraq, claiming that the US wanted to use them for its own interests, rather than for Turkey's. Later, a

'limited deployment' was agreed in return for US$8bn in IMF credit, but the opposition of the Iraqi population to the deployment persuaded the Bush administration to postpone the move indefinitely. Even so, the Turkish military has no intention of waiting forever 'to protect the interests of Turkey', as became obvious during the 'Cyprus dispute'. The majority of Turks in Northern Cyprus endorsed a UN peace plan with the Greek Cypriots of the south in May 2004. This was, however, at the expense of the army's opposition to the plan, on the grounds that 'the UN envisages handing over Cyprus to Western powers as a launch pad to bomb the eastern borders of Turkey when the nation fights its enemies in the region' (Kislali, 2004).

'Western Front': Brussels's trouble with 'realpolitik'

In order to maintain it on a 'pro-Western track' and secure the army's co-operation in the 'war on terror', the American and British governments are backing Turkey's accession to the EU on the grounds that its army is not an obstacle but a guarantor for democracy in Turkey (Straw, 2002). In December 2002, however, at the Copenhagen Summit, the EU reiterated its reservations about embracing Turkey's membership, citing the heavy presence of the army in civil politics.

Even so, the EU does not hesitate to cooperate with the military, as it suits the 'realpolitik'. Ironically, this collaboration sometimes appears to be 'progressive', yet remains contentious in moral and political terms. To help the army keep itself 'clean' from Islamic currents, for instance, the European Court of Human Rights continually turns down objections to the legal lack of accountability of the military in its firing, or coercing into early retirement, of 'untrustworthy' officers (Rumford, 2002). These dismissals, however, play a key role in the decisive power of the army by rooting out not only 'anti-secular' personnel, but also any sort of intra-military faction against fascist and corrupt elements within the army. In particular, such a process paradoxically endangers *sharia* in wider political spectrums, by consolidating the military's decisive power as a barrier to the emergence of democratic oppositions that could win the electoral support of the poor against the growing popularity of pro-Islamic politics.

The EU's cooperation with the army also takes opportunistic forms in order to secure its economic interests. The EU benefits from the military as a trade partner at the expense of democracy and the poor. Favouring cheap imports from Turkey, Brussels avoids trade sanctions against the army's commercial companies. This is in spite of a good legal case for trade sanctions, since the army breaches International Labour Organisation conventions by using the forced labour of conscripted soldiers. EU governments do not refrain from issuing trade licenses for arms exports to Turkey, despite international denouncements on moral grounds. Instead of releasing designated funds to reform Turkey's economy along with those of other candidates', Brussels also hides behind a public fear that the Turkish population is too large and too poor, although demographic studies point to the potential benefits of Turkey's young population for the aging labour force in Europe. Further, in order to exclude Turkey from the EU's expansion, the chair of the Commission for the European Constitution, Valery Giscard D'Estaing, campaigned for specific references to the 'Christian roots of Europe' in the draft for the new constitution. These occurrences politically weaken the pro-democracy claims of Brussels, not only in Turkey but also in the world. As the EU challenges Capitol Hill's 'project for the new American century' for its overseeing of a 'clash of civilisations between the West and Islam', US hawks occasionally remind 'old Europe' of its unfairness to Turkey as a way of 'disproving' the honesty of such concerns.

However, Brussels still has a window of opportunity in which to influence Turkey's political affairs in progressive ways. The EU can encourage the implementation of newly-introduced democratic reforms, by sending out positive messages about the accession prospects of Turkey to the club. Fixing a detailed timetable for accession talks could endorse the enforceability of legal reforms, especially by hampering a military-led campaign to escalate the public's scepticism about the sincerity of the EU's intentions to ever accept Turkey. During the negotiation process, imposing budgetary discipline for fiscal convergence with the EU could also help the government to overcome the generals' resistance to reductions in military expenditure. In particular, conditioning the progress of accession to step-by-step, specified moves toward the democratisation of the parliamentary system could aid the rise of democratic alternatives to both Islamic and

jingoistic tendencies. The choices for Brussels are stark: it will either live up to its pro-democracy claims through concrete actions, or it will remain 'on the wrong side of history', while Turkey is thrown between fundamentalist and fascistic inclinations.

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