

Prospects for Turkey

January 31, 2016

In a June 2015 election, the new People's Democracy Party (HDP) of Turkey passed a highly undemocratic 10 percent threshold to enter the Turkish parliament. In addition to placing a leftist, pro-Kurdish-rights party in the government, the election saw the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) lose its parliamentary majority, seriously damaging President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's ambition to change the country's government from a parliamentary to a presidential system—a barely concealed effort to enhance executive, and hence Erdoğan's, hold on power.



In snap elections called by the AKP just five months later, however, the ruling party obtained 49.4 percent of the vote and regained its parliamentary majority in a dramatic and dispiriting reversal. Though most of the AKP's increase came from voters disillusioned with the far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP), the HDP lost almost a million votes. Crucially, the leftist party was again able to surpass the 10 percent barrier and therefore remain in government, though Erdoğan and AKP leaders view the election as a true expression of the unitary "national will."

What happened over the summer of 2015 to account for the reversal? For starters, the AKP government consistently tried to link HDP members to the officially outlawed Workers' Party of Kurdistan (PKK) after initiating an "anti-terror" campaign against both the Islamic State (ISIS) and the PKK. One problem with the government's dual anti-terror narrative was the fact that violence over the summer was largely directed against the pro-Kurdish left. In July two ISIS suicide bombers targeted a group of socialist Turkish youths in the city of Suruç, killing 33, while in October, ISIS bombed a "labor, peace, and democracy" rally organized by trade unions in Ankara; more than 100 were killed in the heinous attack. While government opponents blamed the state for failing to protect civilians and holding an election in an atmosphere of violence and intimidation, the AKP (and crucially, pro-government media) implausibly accused the PKK of being involved in the attack, while portraying itself as the only power in the country capable of imposing order in an increasingly chaotic environment.

The AKP's successful strategy to maintain its grip on power in 2015 should be seen as part of a wider authoritarian trajectory in recent years that has included assaults on the rights of workers, women, the press, ethnic and religious minorities, and the commons. A number of scholars have linked the rise of the AKP in the twenty-first century with neoliberal reforms in the wake of a military coup in 1980. The decimation of the Turkish left during the coup led to the implementation of pro-market policies, while the state simultaneously promoted the public expression of citizens' Muslim identity. By the early 2000s the AKP had successfully fused a conservative religious orientation with an apparent commitment to transparency, democracy, and freedom in what a number of writers have referred to as a novel hegemonic project.¹

While analysis of post-1980 transformations is essential to understanding current struggles, it is important to recognize that the origins of many conflicts in contemporary Turkey have deep roots in the country and region's past, dating to the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the construction of the Turkish nation-state in the 1920s and 1930s. Moreover, while it is true that the destruction of the left during the coup explains in part the current weakness of radical forces in Turkey, the much

longer historical suppression of the left, as well as the left's own shortcomings, plays an important role in the current balance of forces. Understanding the AKP's strategic victory in the fall of 2015—in particular the climate of fear, conspiracy, and nationalist chauvinism that surrounded the election—requires knowledge of a history rooted in divisions and struggles that long predate the AKP, neoliberalism, or the 1980 coup.

Ambiguous Legacies: From Empire to Republic

Since coming to power in 2002, the AKP has perpetuated a phenomenon known as “Ottomanism,” or “neo-Ottomanism.” From the popular historical fiction television series “The Magnificent Century” (about sixteenth-century sultan Suleiman the Magnificent) to the numerous government-sponsored renovations of Ottoman-era mosques, cemeteries, and palaces in Istanbul, the imperial predecessor of the nation has become ubiquitous in Turkish culture. A particularly divisive recent example has been the construction of Erdoğan's “White Palace” in Ankara, a \$350 million presidential residence designed to reflect Ottoman themes as well as to symbolize the power of the “New Turkey.”

At its peak in the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire held vast territories in North Africa, the Middle East, and southeastern Europe. Submerged under neonationalist celebrations of the formerly powerful state, however, lies a narrative of decline in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as growing Russian and Western powers increasingly threatened Ottoman sovereignty. By the late nineteenth century, the once mighty empire had become the “sick man of Europe,” and the “Eastern Question”—how to maintain a balance of power with the seemingly inevitable dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire—increasingly preoccupied Russian and European imperialists.

Related internal and external threats to Ottoman rule in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contribute to current understandings of global power relations and Turkey's—ostensibly resurgent—place in the region and world. In order to finance the creation of modern militaries and bureaucracies to counter threats from France, Britain, and Russia, the Ottoman government ironically became heavily indebted to European capital. The economic liberalization of the empire demanded by European (mainly British) creditors in exchange for European loans largely benefited Christian Greek and Armenian traders, while many traditional handicrafts were destroyed. By the 1870s, as the wealth and power of Christian communities rose, popular opposition to reforms imposed by outside powers unsurprisingly took a xenophobic cast.

During the same period the rise of ethno-nationalist movements within the empire increasingly threatened Ottoman territorial integrity. Greece obtained independence in 1821, and by the late nineteenth century, rebellions of Christian peasants in the Balkans and the emergence of an Armenian nationalist movement resulted in large-scale violence and massacres. The Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 ended with the loss of almost all the empire's European territories, and population transfers of Muslims and Christians produced a situation in which ethnic Turks for the first time became a majority of the Ottoman population.

Fears of domestic separatists in league with foreign powers intent on overturning the state culminated in the virtual destruction of the Ottoman Armenian population in World War I. During the war, between 800,000 and 1.5 million Armenians were killed, which is to this day justified by many in Turkey in terms of military necessity. Though denial of the Armenian Genocide has lost credibility among academics in recent years, influential writers like Andrew Mango, Sükrü Hanioglu, and others remain circumspect when discussing the “deportations.”

Though the Great War brought an end to the Ottoman Empire, a successful war of independence fought under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal created the Turkish Republic in 1923. Kemal was a

product of late imperial attempts to create a modern military and bureaucracy. Often educated in Europe, young Muslim recruits constituted a new intelligentsia beginning with the Young Ottomans of the 1860s, and the Young Turks in the late nineteenth century. European intellectual developments greatly influenced these officers and bureaucrats; however, while nationalist and positivist ideas were prominent, socialist theories made no inroads in Young Turk ideology. Kemal would become a member of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), a secret organization initially linked to the Young Turks that came to play a leading role in the creation of a constitutional government in 1908, the massacre of Armenians during the war, and the establishment of the Turkish Republic in the 1920s.

Though committed to the creation of a secular state and fearful of the influence of political Islam, the conservative nationalism of Kemal and the CUP contained a distinctively religious element, a unique characteristic of Turkish nationalism.² Thus while Kemal did not hesitate to utilize religious discourse during the independence struggle, under his direction a secular republic was founded and the sultanate was abolished as the new regime undertook a program of rapid Westernization. The “Six Arrows” of Kemalism—republicanism, secularism, nationalism, populism, statism, and reformism—defined the founding ideology of the Turkish nation. For many secular-nationalist opponents of the AKP, the Six Arrows remain a crucial progressive inheritance of the republic’s founding, a contradictory legacy all too apparent today.

Crucially, many Kemalist reforms required a radical, and often unpopular, cultural revolution from above. In addition to the incorporation of religion into the state, modernization also allegedly required Turkification, one manifestation of which was the attempted cleansing of Kurdish language and culture from the nation. According to historian David McDowall, a 1925 revolt in the Kurdish-majority southeast marked the beginning of “implacable Kemalism,” a form of repression that continued throughout the later 1920s and 1930s. “Systematic deportation and razing of villages, brutality and killing of innocents, martial law or special regimes in Kurdistan now became the commonplace experience of Kurds wherever they defied the state.”³

Kurdish identity and culture were not the only casualties of the early republican years. A small but growing anti-imperialist left supported the republican independence movement and revolution in the late 1910s and early 1920s, but after independence Kemal eliminated (with death if necessary) any threat from the left. The Law for the Maintenance of Public Order, which followed the revolt of 1925, was used to close down existing unions as well as to suppress socialist, liberal, and religious organizations and publications. The Labor Law of 1936, like Turkey’s penal system, was modeled on that of Fascist Italy: Strikes were banned in a number of sectors, and class politics and communist propaganda were prohibited. Government policy in the 1930s, as Erik Zürcher and Feroz Ahmad have argued, came to have fascist and even totalitarian characteristics.⁴

The Working Class and the Turkish Left

In addition to state repression, one of the problems confronting the Turkish left in the early twentieth century was the small size of the urban working class. Large-scale industrialization and urban migration beginning in the 1940s and 1950s changed this, at the same time that political parties were first allowed to challenge the one-party rule of Kemal’s People’s Republican Party (CHP), today the largest opposition party in Turkey. The lifting of a ban on class-based organizations and the securing of the constitutional right to form labor associations in the 1940s had distinct limits, however, as political unionism was prohibited, and the end of the decade culminated in a witch-hunt against the left as Turkey came under U.S. tutelage in the early Cold War.

Both the CHP and the new Democratic Party (DP) participated in the red scare, but it was the DP’s surprise electoral victory in 1950 that signaled a decisive shift in state policy. Despite the party’s

classical liberal orientation, the DP continued the CHP policy of coopting labor, most notably in aiding the establishment of the Confederation of Turkish Labor Unions (Türk-İş) in 1952. Türk-İş adopted a Kemalist ideology in rejecting class politics in favor of the corporate nation, and was linked directly to the Cold War through its ties to the AFL-CIO and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

By the second half of the 1950s, however, worsening economic conditions, increasing demands for the right to strike among rank-and-file workers, and the growing authoritarianism of the DP contributed to tensions between Türk-İş and the ruling party. In 1960 the Democrats were removed from power in a military putsch—though not because of the government's labor policies. As guardians of the Kemalist secular establishment, military authorities were worried by the DP's increasingly religious discourse and its relaxation of restrictions on public expressions of Muslim identity. Though the coup was greeted with public celebrations in major cities like Ankara and Istanbul, the countryside "remained ominously silent," and the execution of prime minister and DP founder Adnan Menderes the following year was unlikely to have improved the image of the takeover in the minds of the rural Turkish majority.⁵

After the coup a group of university professors was charged with drafting a new constitution, which was far more progressive than the post-independence constitution of 1924. The ban on political activity was lifted, and workers' right to organize and strike was legalized. In 1961 the Turkish Workers' Party was formed, the first legal political party that focused on advancing the interests of peasants and the working class. Union membership and strike activity exploded in the 1960s, while a new labor federation, the Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions, emerged to challenge the labor movement hegemony of Türk-İş. This organization and militancy pushed the state to implement improvements in workers' social rights and real wages, while an import substitution industrialization (ISI) model guided state economic policy for the next two decades.⁶

Growing working-class power in the 1960s coincided with the radicalization of large numbers of students and intellectuals in the new "social state" of the Second Republic. These developments remained largely parallel, however, rather than integrated. Leftist groups and publications articulated what Ahmet Samim has characterized as a distinctly Kemalist type of radicalism. The idea of a "national democratic revolution" (NDR) projected "that the elite, technocrats and officers, would lead Turkey 'independently' on behalf of the workers and peasants—for the people, despite the people."⁷ Sectarian theoretical disputes on the left were countered on the right by the formation of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and its youth wing, the fascist Grey Wolves, who received paramilitary training and began a violent campaign to intimidate radical students, teachers, publishers, and politicians in 1969.

A suggestive example of the radical intelligentsia's failure to read the popular mood occurred in 1970 when, in response to legislation that threatened to restrict labor organization, the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey called for a public protest. Tens of thousands of workers—perhaps as many as 100,000—took to the streets in two days of demonstrations, which were met with state repression and the declaration of martial law. Rather than engage directly in workers' struggles NDR groups began a guerilla war, with many hoping sympathetic officers in the military would help overthrow the government. The military did take power in 1971—but rather than staging a leftist coup, authorities used martial law to apprehend thousands of students and workers and began a campaign to destroy the guerillas.

Street and campus violence continued in the 1970s despite the coup, infamously symbolized by the killing of 39 during a May Day demonstration in Taksim Square in 1977, in which between 200,000 and 500,000 socialists demonstrated in downtown Istanbul. While it is customary to denounce the political violence of both right and left during this decade, under both right-wing and social

democratic governments in the 1970s, Turkish security forces were infiltrated by fascists who shielded and aided the Grey Wolves.⁸

The right-wing offensive coincided with a political-economic attack that had profoundly damaging consequences for the left. The establishment of ISI policies to develop domestic industry had contributed to an impressive annual growth rate of 6.9 percent between 1963 and 1976. By the late 1970s, however, debt crises and ballooning inflation were accompanied by serious social conflict. In 1978 the CHP government began negotiations for new loans with the IMF, the World Bank, and the OECD. Negotiations continued under the center-right Justice Party in 1979, and the following year reforms were implemented under the direction of Turgut Özal, Undersecretary of the Prime Ministry and New Right-style politician.

Yet the “Chilean solution” to Turkey’s economic problems was fiercely resisted by workers as labor unrest surged in the late 1970s and as political violence continued to escalate. The conflicts of the 1970s thus culminated in yet another military coup in September of 1980. While many in Turkey saw the intervention as necessary in ending the chaos of these years, the hundreds of thousands of arrests and widespread torture that accompanied the military takeover deeply traumatized the populace. The consequences of the 1980 coup for civil society and the economy—and particularly for a decimated left—are still being felt today.

Neoliberalism and the AKP

In the wake of the coup a new constitution was implemented in 1982. In addition to restrictions of fundamental civil liberties, the constitution (which still governs Turkey today) banned political, solidarity, and national strikes; prohibited membership in more than one union; and imposed draconian requirements for union certification. The result, as intended, was a dramatic decline in the number of unions in Turkey and the virtual elimination of organized labor from the policy-making process.

One of the most fateful, and ironic, decisions of the post-coup government was the official encouragement of the “Turkish-Islamic Synthesis.” In order to assure there would be no resurgence of formerly powerful forces on the left after the coup, the historical guardians of the secular Kemalist order revived an ideology that linked religion with Turkish ethnic nationalism. Popular among the nationalist right in the 1970s, after 1983 the doctrine became a guiding principle for Özal and his new Motherland Party, and was reflected by increased public funding for religion, especially in education.

The absence of an organized left and a strong union movement to combat neoliberal reforms resulted in the rise of precarious forms of work and the privatization of state enterprises, resulting in wage repression, declining purchasing power for workers, and growing inequality. Crucially, one facilitating factor in the growth in labor exploitation was the outbreak of an armed independence movement in the Kurdish provinces. Though in the 1960s and 1970s Kurds played a prominent role in Turkish trade unionism and socialist politics, the left’s general refusal to place Kurdish grievances at the center of its agenda led to the formation of independent Kurdish organizations. The Workers’ Party of Kurdistan (PKK) was established in 1978, and in 1984 the officially banned celebration of the Kurdish New Year signaled the beginning of PKK guerilla activity in the southeast. The ensuing war and brutal repression of Kurds—not only of the PKK—in Turkey displaced close to a million people; more than 40,000 have died. Many of those whose villages were destroyed migrated to cities in the west, where they became urban workers in the new precarious economy.

Political instability was exacerbated by three major economic recessions between 1994 and 2001, which paved the way for the emergence of the Welfare Party (RP). The rapid growth of the RP and

its anti-Western Islamist form of identity politics frightened the establishment, however, leading to yet another military intervention in 1997 and the closing of the party. The RP mayor of Istanbul between 1994 and 1998, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, received a ten-month prison sentence in 1999 for his political activities; in 2001 he and other former RP members established the Justice and Development Party (AKP).

The success of the AKP beginning with the general election of 2002 was premised on the lack of legitimacy of the coup, the party's populist strategy of "conservative democracy," and its commitment to EU membership, civil liberties, and government transparency. While the AKP is clearly a capitalist party, through the early 2000s the maintenance of social welfare programs and the growth of religious charity organizations helped gain the party the support of many poor and working-class citizens. Dramatic economic growth in the early 2000s, though driven by speculation and short-term international investment with a historical—indeed chronically debilitating—dependence on external debt, has contributed to the party's popular image in "making Turkey great again." Until 2015, the AKP had seen its support grow in every election since 2002, an unprecedented phenomenon in Turkish history.

Though workers have been crucial supporters of the AKP, they have not greatly benefitted from the party's period in office. Turkey was the third most unequal country in the OECD as of 2011, behind only Chile and Mexico (with the U.S. a close fourth). Though trade union density across the OECD has fallen in an age of neoliberal capitalism, Turkey's decline has been particularly spectacular. Union density shrank from 9.5 percent of the population in 2002 (down from approximately 35 percent of those formally employed in 1980) to just 5.9 percent in 2010-2011—the most precipitous decline of any OECD member.⁹ As the regime has promoted a highly gendered agenda concerning individual morality, the family, and religious values, collective and democratic forms of solidarity like unions have come under attack.

A consequence of low unionization rates and new forms of precarious labor has been work accidents and deaths. Turkey ranks first in workplace fatalities among OECD nations, with jobs in deregulated industries like coal mining and construction particularly dangerous.¹⁰ According to the OECD, Turkish workers are the most exploited ("underprivileged" in their euphemistic terminology) in Europe. They experience more accidents, are paid less, and work longer hours than their working-class counterparts in other member states of the capitalist club.¹¹

Resistance: Gezi to Today

Though many liberals were initially drawn to the AKP's democratic, if conservative, promises and rhetoric, popular opposition to its policies emerged after its victory in a 2007 general election. A sample of targets of anti-government protest in recent years includes: new legal restrictions on abortion rights and frequent pro-natalist statements from state officials, neoliberal and religiously oriented education reforms, the imprisonment of journalists, attacks against labor and student demonstrations, and the destruction of historic cultural sites in the interest of pro-market renewal schemes.

Yet a number of developments between 2013 and 2015 have put into stark relief the extent to which the AKP government is willing to resort to repressive measures that recall state tactics of past years. First, the Gezi movement of the summer of 2013—a protest against the demolition of Gezi Park in Istanbul that blossomed into a nationwide movement involving millions—was met with ruthless suppression. While by autumn, state repression and a general lack of direction or strategy led to the demise of demonstrations, the movement indicated widespread opposition to the ruling party and constituted the first major crisis of AKP hegemony.¹² Moreover, while by the end of the year the prefigurative social gatherings inspired by Gezi were gone, a massive corruption scandal involving

high-level officials (including Erdoğan) erupted in December. Some writers believe the desperate attempts by Erdoğan to maintain an AKP majority in parliament are more about limiting the possibility of an inquiry into the scandal than changing the country's constitution.¹³

While workers, unions, and Kurdish groups were slow to join the largely middle-class and youth Gezi movement, a mine explosion in the western city of Soma in the spring of 2014 that killed more than 300 coal miners led thousands of workers across the nation to rise in protest. The state used tactics identical to those used on Gezi protestors (tear gas, water cannons, beatings, and arrests) to disperse demonstrators, while during his visit to Soma, Erdoğan informed the relatives of dead and dying miners that "these types of incidents are ordinary things," and listed a series of mining accidents going back to nineteenth-century England.¹⁴

Further labor unrest has been met with yet more denials of fundamental democratic rights. In recent years the government has consistently invoked a law from the post-1980 coup period allowing the Council of Ministers to suspend strikes if they are deemed "prejudicial to public health or national security." In 2013 and 2014, glass and metal workers had massive strikes "suspended" by the government; in essence there is today no right to strike in Turkey. Worker militancy has nonetheless been evident: In the spring of 2015 thousands of auto workers engaged in a wildcat strike in defiance of management and their union. Notably, opposition parties have failed to seize on working-class hostility to owners and the government.¹⁵

The AKP's suppression of protests also coincided with its abandonment of a "resolution process" initiated with the PKK in 2012-2013. Though it has been widely reported that a cease-fire ended because of PKK attacks against police forces after the ISIS suicide bombing of the Federation of Socialist Youth Associations (SGDF) in the southern city of Suruç in 2015, according to HDP co-chair Selahattin Demirtaş, the AKP effectually abandoned the resolution process back in 2013.¹⁶ This was also the period during which ISIS began its attacks against Rojava and Kobanê, and some have speculated that the AKP's permissive policy towards ISIS was part of an effort to undermine Kurdish resistance in Syria—and hence weaken the PKK within Turkey. When this failed and the HDP entered parliament in 2015, a new strategy took shape, one that suggests yet more violence in a country that is no stranger to violent conflict.

Conclusion: Reckoning with the Present and Past

The history of modern Turkey shows that forces for radical change have consistently been targets of violence instigated by the "security state" or elected governments unwilling to cede power. Those aware of the imperial and national past recognize the ways in which state authorities have directly, or through proxies, enflamed ethnic and religious tensions to forestall radical democratic transformation. The AKP's current discourse of a unified "national will" being threatened by outside forces, parallel structures, and "marginal elements" is not new, and as in the past the left is a prime target of the state's machinery of repression.

It is also the case that despite the authoritarian history of the government, the Turkish left has often utilized a statist, vanguardist approach to change. In part this has to do with the complex legacy of Kemalism—even today the visage of Mustafa Kemal is ubiquitous in Turkey, and with the AKP's rise many in the republican elite cling ever more tightly to the myth of the secular savior. However progressive some of the changes wrought by Atatürk may have been, it must be recognized that the undemocratic nature of Kemalist reforms were widely resented, and acknowledging the historical limitations of the Kemalist state are essential to remaking the Turkish left.

The biggest hurdles for a resurgent left in Turkey remain the same ethnic and religious distinctions

that have historically divided the working class. The *only* way forward in Turkey is for ostensible leftists of a nationalist orientation to join with pro-Kurdish forces in creating a truly mass movement at the grassroots level. Importantly, this requires more than a discourse of pluralism or a political party like the HDP—however deserving of support the party may be. If one historical failure of the left has been its inability to grasp the importance of minority issues, a danger today is that the best that can be hoped for is a European-style liberal democracy where the rule of capital goes unquestioned. A revitalized labor movement able to harness widespread working-class discontent and the construction of a movement culture willing to confront reactionary conservatism in neoliberal Turkey is thus essential. Ultimately, formulating a serious democratic socialist alternative to the religious populism of the AKP requires movement building from below, which in turn demands learning from past successes and failures.

Footnotes

1. Particularly useful is İsmet Akça, Ahmet Bekmen, and Barış Alp Özden, eds., *Turkey Reframed: Constituting Neoliberal Hegemony*, (London: Pluto Press, 2014).
2. Hugh Poulton, *Top Hat, Grey Wolf and Crescent: Turkish Nationalism and the Turkish Republic* (London: Hurst & Company, 1997).
3. David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 1996), 198.
4. Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 3rd ed. (London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 2009), 176-98; Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey* (Routledge, 1993), 62-63, 99.
5. Zürcher, 241.
6. Brian Mello, ed., *European Journal of Turkish Studies* (No. 11, 2010), ejts.revues.org.
7. Ahmet Samin, "The Tragedy of the Turkish Left," *New Left Review* (No. 126, March-April 1981), 60-85.
8. Zürcher, 263; Samin, 80.
9. Aziz Çelik, "Trade Unions and Deunionization During Ten Years of AKP Rule," *Perspectives: Political Analysis and Commentary from Turkey* (No. 3, December 2012), 44-48.
10. Hendrik Müller, "The Dire State of Labor Rights in Turkey," *The Turkey Analyst*, September 24, 2014.
11. "Turkey's blue collar workers cite poor conditions as main reason to find new job: Poll," *Hurriyet Daily News*, August 20, 2015.
12. Some have convincingly linked the HDP's electoral success to Gezi, for example, Constanze Letsch and Ian Traynor, "Election result heralds a new Turkey, but not the one Erdoğan wanted," *Guardian*, June 8, 2015.
13. Sungar Savran, "Turkey and Its Kurds at War," *New Politics*, September 19, 2015.
14. Emrah Yıldız, "The Soma Massacre, the Spine Tower, and the Corporate-State's Fitrat in Turkey," *Bianet*, May 21, 2014.
15. Daniel Johnson, "Workers in the New Turkey," *Jacobin*, April 5, 2015; Daniel Johnson, "The Meaning of the Election in Turkey," *New Politics*, June 25, 2015.
16. "HDP co-chair Demirtaş reveals details of peace process," *Hurriyet Daily News*, July 28, 2015.