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The Left in Turkey: Survival and Resistance under Authoritarianism

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The Left in Turkey: Survival and Resistance under Authoritarianism

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What is the future of the left in Turkey? Any answer to this question will have to begin by reckoning with the failure of the opposition, including the left, in the last general and presidential elections held in May 2023. 21 years into its rule, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), and its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, secured yet another victory in arguably one of the most critical elections in the history of the country. This was a victory that was hard to explain at first sight. Turkey has been experiencing a terrible economic crisis, with inflation at 85% at the end of 2022 and the Turkish lira hitting record lows.¹ The country had also faced a devastating earthquake just three months earlier, which revealed, beyond doubt, the extent of the decay and corruption in public services in the state's inadequate response, and the human and environmental costs of AKP's economic policies. There were thus the conditions for mobilizing a strong opposition, especially a leftist one, which was also potentially best suited to appeal to the vast majority of the society facing a severe cost of living crisis.

The inability of the left to cultivate such a mobilization cannot be understood without taking into consideration the type of authoritarian regime the AKP has established. Although the AKP's authoritarianism had already been in the making since at least its third electoral victory in 2011, and the transition to an "exceptional state" after the failed coup attempt in 2016 (Oğuz 2016), regime change was sealed in 2018. Erdoğan managed to introduce a super presidential system with no check and balance mechanisms in place, a parliament stripped of its power, and the last traces of the rule of law erased (Yılmaz 2020). This is a system that leaves a limited space for the opposition to maneuver, and certainly a slim one, if any, for the left.

Pointing to the presidential system as the main obstacle to Turkey's return to democracy, the largest opposition block, called the "Nation Alliance" - an unlikely alliance of five right-wing parties with a center-left one led by the presidential candidate Kemal

¹ 85.51% was the official figure revealed by the Turkish Statistical Institute in November 2022. There is, however, widespread distrust in official figures, and other surveys, such as the one conducted by the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce, calculated a much higher rate of 109% (Sönmez 2022).

Kılıçdaroğlu² - put reinstituting the parliamentary system at the top of their electoral agenda. Their inability to win against the so-called “People’s Alliance”, the AKP’s coalition with the ultra-nationalists and Islamists, inadvertently helped confirm the presidential system and made it even harder to reverse it in the near future.³ The last elections, then, can be seen as the beginning of a new era where authoritarianism not only is consolidated but will also be emboldened ideologically. There have been signs in the few months following the elections that the Islamist and Turkish nationalist currents, which were already at work to delegitimize and suppress the opposition and reshape state institutions, are being weaponized to directly target groups and individual citizens, making freedom of association and assembly practically nonexistent. It is therefore an enormous challenge for the left to go beyond surviving this authoritarian repression and build a strategy to counter the feeling of hopelessness and political apathy becoming prevalent in society.

In many ways, the left in Turkey is ill-prepared for such a challenge. It has not only been very fragmented ideologically and organizationally, but also electorally and is politically weak.⁴ It has long lost its hegemony over the politics of the streets, which was so evident in the 1960s and 70s. In addition to an unprecedented student mobilization

within universities, which eventually turned into a revolutionary movement towards the end of the 60s (Lüküslü 2015; Pekesen 2020), this was also a period when Turkey witnessed a dramatic expansion of organized labor. The legal changes that made such an expansion possible, such as the 1963 Union Act, which recognized the right to strike for the first time, were indeed the results of an already growing working-class activism and political identity. This could also be traced to the formation of the Labor Party of Turkey in 1961—the first socialist party to enter the Turkish parliament (Mello 2007). The militancy of the labor movement intensified with the foundation of the Confederation of Revolutionary Labor Unions in 1967, which organized the strikes, workplace occupations, and rallies that marked the Turkey of the 1970s. With the increasing radicalization of the left after the military intervention in 1971, as well as the deepening of political polarization, violence between leftist and far-right militants intensified. The far-right functioned effectively as paramilitary structures helped by the state, not just clashing with the left but also targeting ethnic and religious minorities associated with it, such as the Alevis and the Kurds (Gourisse 2023).

The military coup of 12 September 1980 came in such circumstances. Although the coup was legitimized by the need to put an end to political violence, and thus to also sup-

2 It is a long debate as to whether the People’s Republican Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP), the founding party of the republic and the main opposition party in the last two decades, can even be seen on the left. Although the party’s adoption of Kemalism, the founding ideology of Turkey named after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, hinders its positioning as a center left party akin to the social democratic parties in Europe and elsewhere, the CHP has aligned itself with the left of the center since the mid-1960s (Emre 2014).

3 Erdoğan’s alliance with two far right parties was expanded right before the 2023 elections to incorporate two more parties: HUDAPAR (Free Cause Party) and New Welfare Party. The HUDAPAR, an Islamist party with links to the armed group Hezbollah in the Kurdish region, increased the radical tone of the alliance’s Islamism.

4 Publications on the history of the left in Turkey are unfortunately scarce in English. For a comprehensive volume in Turkish, see Gültekingil 2007.

press the far-right groups, its main target was the left. The rupture that the coup and the subsequent military regime created in Turkish politics and society cannot be overstated. It was so fundamental that the left in Turkey is still trying to recover from that trauma, four decades on. In addition to the brutal suppression of all leftist parties, organizations, and trade unions,⁵ the coup paved the way for Turkey's transition to neoliberalism. This transition was complemented with, and sustained by, a systematic policy of curtailing unionization of the working classes and a realignment of the state along a new official ideology, the "Turkish-Islamic Synthesis". There is thus a degree of continuity between AKP's neoconservative authoritarianism and the neoliberal, "Turkish-Islamic" state form it inherited. Indeed, the very rise of the AKP cannot be explained without understanding the entanglement between neoliberalism and Turkish Islamism in the post-1980 period (Şen 2010; Özden, Akça, and Bekmen 2017). Given the regime the AKP was able to establish, one can also say that this entanglement has worked relatively smoothly in deradicalizing organized labor, weakening the left, and mobilizing the voters, especially the urban poor, through populist social policies and a nationalist-neoconservative rhetoric constantly portraying the state and the nation under threat.⁶

This "success" has not gone without challenge, however. There have been opportunities and glimmers of hope for the social opposition in general and the left in partic-

ular. It seems that these opportunities, some of which were quite transformative, can also be the foundation on which the left can shape a more promising future for itself. The labor movement, for example, although unable to reach its pre-1980 strength, has continued to resist neoliberal restructuring, and organized several waves of strikes and protests against privatization and precarious employment conditions (Doğan 2010; Yaman and Topal 2019). The new social movements, which emerged in the post-1980 period, have also proved incredibly resilient. The Kurdish and the feminist movements have been arguably the most resourceful and impactful against AKP's authoritarianism in the last decade and they continue to go into the streets and thus keep social opposition alive despite state repression, which is especially brutal for the Kurds (Kandiyoti 2019; Gunes 2020). In addition, Turkey had its own "spring" in 2013, when the AKP's plan to demolish the Gezi Park in Taksim, Istanbul, and build a shopping mall in its place, inflamed a country-wide uprising. The Gezi Uprising not only politicized millions but brought together, for the first time, different activist groups, from anti-capitalist Muslims to environmentalists and the LGBTQ. It also had a spillover impact on labor activism, creating a transformative momentum for the opposition (Ercan and Oğuz 2015). In other words, there has been social mobilization and resistance, against all odds. The ability of the left to build on and (re)ignite those instances of resistance, which has proved very weak so far, is going to be the determining factor for its strength in the

5 The 1980 military coup resulted in the arrest of 650 thousand people. There were 517 death sentences, of which 50 were executed. In addition to hundreds of suspicious deaths, it was documented that 171 people were killed during torture, 1 million and 683 thousand people were blacklisted, 30 thousand lost their jobs, 14 thousand expatriated, and 30 thousand had to leave the country as political refugees. While these are total figures, a great majority of them were leftist activists. See 2 volumes report of the parliamentary commission at <https://acikerisim.tbmm.gov.tr/handle/11543/2782?locale-attribute=en>. Accessed 8 September 2023.

6 The failed coup attempt of 15 July 2016 provided Erdoğan the opportunity to reinforce this theme of the "survival of the state" and legitimize further suppression of the opposition (Esen and Gümüşçü 2017).

coming years.

Leftist parties tried to cultivate that ability before the last elections by establishing a third block, an alternative to the mainstream opposition, under the name “Labor and Freedom Alliance”. Alliances have partly become a necessity for electoral success because of the changes the AKP introduced in the election system. Given the left’s historical failure to unite, it was substantial progress for the six left-wing parties to be able to join forces. Two of these parties, the Peoples’ Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP), itself an alliance of Kurdish and socialist parties, and the Labor Party of Turkey (Türkiye İşçi Partisi, TİP), were already represented in the parliament and had been the main voices of leftist opposition to the AKP regime. The significance of the left alliance was its role in introducing a labor perspective in the opposition and proposing a radical democratic alternative to the National Alliance’s limited vision of democratization, as well as its alarmingly nationalist and anti-immigrant election campaign. Yet, the left alliance did not gather the support that the initial enthusiasm optimistically forecasted, even though the TİP managed to get almost a million votes and maintain its 4 MPs in the parliament. For its part, the HDP, having had to enter the election under another party’s banner because of the closure case it is facing,⁷ won 61 seats and kept its position as the third largest party in the parliament.⁸ The leftist block was unable to turn into a true alliance after a crack emerged between the HDP and the TİP, demonstrating, once again, that the

left in Turkey has its own “Kurdish issue” to overcome before it can build a broad-based resistance that offers a truly democratic, egalitarian alternative to the society (Yeğen 2007).

Such a broad-based resistance also requires a political framework that goes beyond electoral strategies and alliances. Especially in AKP-type authoritarian regimes where elections are far from fair and increasingly turned into mechanisms of bolstering the regime’s legitimacy, the expansion of social opposition seems to depend on the ability to cultivate alternative practices, such as neighborhood forums, local environmentalist mobilizations, and issue-based campaigns. To be able to link those pockets of opposition under an over-arching agenda and speak to broader segments of the population, the left perhaps also needs be much bolder in (re)embracing the notions underlying the republican ethos.⁹ For example, the left’s inability to respond to the widespread discontent about the AKP’s systematic policies of desecularization and religious social engineering, especially acute in education and in regulations and discourses around gender, family and sexuality (Kandiyoti and Emanet 2017; Adak 2021), requires a critical reflection. Mobilizing against such policies cannot be seen as a deviation from the “real” agenda of the left; it is vital for millions of people in the country—the Alevis, women, the LGBTQ and the non-Muslims. Nor does it mean a reconciliation between Kemalism and the left. It is about time for the left to get over its “Kemalism complex” and claim the ambition for a secular, democratic republic for all, without falling into the trap of romanticizing a mythical, good “old”

⁷ The HDP, whose hundreds of members, including former co-presidents, Figen Yüksekdağ and Selahattin Demirtaş, and several democratically elected mayors, are in jail, faces a closure case at the Constitutional Court. Party closure was also used repeatedly against the HDP’s predecessors.

⁸ This is despite a decline in the party’s votes compared to the previous general elections, from 11.7% to 8.82%.

⁹ For a recent and stimulating discussion on the possibilities of such a vision for the left, see Saraçoğlu 2023.

Turkey against Erdoğan's "new" one. ♦

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