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Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that define U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Michelle Nhuch (NHUCH@MIT.EDU, 617.253.1965)

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Turkey's Crisis and Future

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The two trials that have been occupying the Turkish national agenda today are likely to be the milestones of Turkey's ability to rid itself of an opaque regime shaped under bureaucratic tutelary.

One of the trials concerned the closure of the incumbent Justice and Development Party (AK Party) and has finally been concluded, with a narrow victory for the ruling party and democratic governance. The other is the Ergenekon case, which may unravel the illegal nationalist organization intent on overthrowing the government and bringing an isolationist dictatorial regime under the guise of national sovereignty.

The attempt to close the AK Party—deemed the center of anti-secular activities threatening the state—began with a Constitutional Court verdict annulling a newly enacted law that lifted a headscarf ban at universities. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's reply was to accuse the Court of overriding Parliament and threatening national stability—its headscarf policy is part of democratic reforms to advance free speech and minority rights and has the support of the EU, which Turkey seeks to join. This is true, however much the party lost enthusiasm for liberalizing and democratizing Turkey's system as part of its EU bid.

In its late July decision, the judiciary narrowly allowed the AK Party to survive—and, with other political and civic organizations, to broaden the base of political participation and public discourse. This is all to the good, though the fact that the case was brought to begin with remain troubling.

The question is whether or not Turkey will be able to expose its alternative history, bludgeoned by human rights violations, thousands of unsolved assassinations, restrictions put on liberties, and military interventions in the political process and start a new age marked with liberal ideals.

The Long Night of the Generals

The Ergenekon indictment has been formulated and a case has been initiated into this putschist organization, labeled by the prosecutor as a terrorist outfit at the High Criminal Court, which sees crimes against the state. The document is a summation of a hundred thousand pages of evidence and supporting material. The indictment itself

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consists of 441 files that add up to 2,455 pages. That is why it took nearly a year to put it together and build a case.

As of today, 48 suspects are in detention and 38 more will be prosecuted without being under arrest. Altogether 86 suspects are accused of being members of an armed terrorist organization intent on destroying the Turkish Republic by resorting to force and violence, “making it impossible for the state to function, instigating people to rise up in arms, encouraging an assault on the Council of State (in 2006 in which a judge was killed and several others wounded) and throwing bombs at the *Cumhuriyet* daily as well as encouraging insubordination within the military, sequestering confidential documents pertaining to the security of the state,” etc.

The last two accusations were the straws that broke the camel’s back. They directly involve the disruption of the military’s unity and chain of command. The prosecutor has relied on a definition of terrorism that referred to forming an outfit to “weaken the authority of the state and to jeopardize its internal or external security.”

To the amazement of many, the so-called “coup memoirs” of Adm. Özden Örnek, a former commander of the Naval Forces, were not used as substantiating evidence. In fact, the 2,000 pages of these memoirs, dating back to Adm. Örnek’s first day in the navy, contain lucid information on how several force commanders and other generals plotted a series of coups in 2004 against Erdogan’s civilian government that were aborted by the then chief of general staff, Gen. Hilmi Özkök. In those days there was so much pressure on Gen. Özkök that he even brought his own food from home to evade the possibility of being poisoned.

However, it did not take too long for the chief military prosecutor to appeal to the prosecutor of the Ergenekon trial to send him all the related material against generals Sener Eruygur and Hursit Tolon who were both arrested in conjunction with the Ergenekon probe. Additionally, the military prosecutor has started to investigate the coup memoirs to prosecute them for their past deeds, if deemed necessary by the military.

The rationale is simple: If the retired four-star generals were really involved in aborted coup attempts and have gone on with their activities after retirement by involving civilians, this means civil war. No army can allow an internal split and a civil war initiated by elements from within. That is the reason why the Turkish Armed Forces are getting more active in cleansing this cancerous mentality and its representatives within, for it sees that being an army of an isolated second-rate country is neither to its benefit nor consonant with the promise of the republic to build a modern and Western country based on the popular will.

The Coup Mentality

What is most striking is the way and the ease with which these people plot to overthrow an elected government and impose their will on the majority, believing that they know best and can run the country better. What is the source of this delusion?

The ideological foundations of military coups come from the very training of military personnel. They are not raised and trained as professional soldiers only. They are socialized into being “saviors” that would deliver the society from both external threats as well as self-destructive deviations. These deviations are transgressing the straightjacket forced on society via constitutions made after each coup. So the Turkish military keeps guard over a system by and large designed by itself. Social change and popular demands for participation, liberalization and globalization are seen as subversion.

Needless to say this is not a conviction shared by the entire military establishment. Otherwise all the recent information that has surfaced in the press would not have been leaked out by constitutionalist and pro-democratic officers. Hence we can claim that by allowing the search of rooms in military premises and condoning the arrest of former commanders, the Turkish military is initiating an unprecedented process of extracting rotten apples to save the sack.

Does this mean that the era of coups is over? This has yet to be seen. People are conditioned for the fact of coups as a last resort to maintain law and order. As long as the popular expect-

tation to call in the army to amend things during times of crisis prevails, Turkey will never shed the identity of being an “army nation” and choose a deliberative-pluralist democracy over a tutelary republic.

The roots of this go back to the 1920s. The young Turkish Republic was composed of two major social classes. The military-civilian bureaucracy empowered by its grip on the state apparatus and the vast peasant masses. The minority bourgeoisie was eliminated by population exchanges (with Greece) or through punitive deportation (as was the case with Armenians). There was no Turkish-Muslim bourgeoisie worthy of mention. The small middle class was mainly of bureaucratic nature, deriving its income, status and power from its affiliation with the state.

The peasants were traditional, poor, unorganized and ignorant. The state treated them as its handicapped child and figuratively locked them up in the basement. Prohibited to show up in the public realm as they were, the rural population remained intact and in place until the 1950s. During this time the state tried to create a dependent bourgeoisie with subsidies, suppressed worker wages, cheap inputs, high tariff walls for imports, favorable credits and monopoly status in the market. Such a dependent business class never challenged the golden hand that fed it.

However, this closed system came under the stress of expansion within and globalization from without. Beginning with the 1980s, Turkey opened up to the world. A new business class emerged from the countryside (often referred to as the Anatolian Tigers) and began to demand the same privileges that the urban state-fed bourgeoisie enjoyed. They owed nothing to the state for their existence, growth and international expansion. Their demands were met by resistance on the grounds that they were too religious and conservative.

Secondly, the mechanization and commercialization of traditional Turkish agriculture following World War II to meet the demand of Europe under reconstruction led to massive migration from the countryside. These former peasants became the source of parochial and conservative new urban dwellers. They and the peasants became the customers of the new bourgeoisie that was on the rise. So they had to be economically and socially empowered.

The appearance of the people on the street began to change, as did their demands and expectations. More women in conservative garb (with covered heads) entered the university and the job market. Political parties that answered the call of more pious citizens began to compete in politics. These new social forces wanted more participation, a bigger piece of the pie and more services. They had waited too long and they had no time. All of these developments were watched with awe and anxiety by the old elite who did not want to share power and privilege with these newcomers who for them had no finesse in dining and wining or dancing. They were pious and their wives did not look “modern.” These were symbolically dangerous for the secular regime and had to be locked away once more. The problem is that they are too numerous and the basement is not spacious enough. This is the gist of the political crisis that looks like a regime crisis from afar.

Nationalism and Democracy

Turkey has to choose between a full-fledged democracy that will keep it connected with the world, especially the Western world, and an illiberal regime that will isolate itself from global realities and perhaps lead to entropy to the point of losing its unity. What is critical at this point are the political values of the “left”—the only viable opposition—and its relations with nationalism.

Any analysis of nationalism must start with how it views liberal values and basic political principles. Recent history shows us that belated nationalisms and the nation-states that they have created never really liked liberalism. Why? Because late nationalism (having emerged after capitalism was established as a global economic system) and early nationalism (which founded nation-states that turned imperialist) relied on the state both to create a nation and to govern it.

The Turkish left is a combination of late Ottoman Young Turk Jacobinism (personified by the Committee—later Party—of Union and Progress) turned Kemalist (revolution from above, via Atatürk) during the republic, and Marxism. The first two veins carry blood to state-guided authoritarian transformation and nation building. The third denotes anti-imperialism and a fuzzy anti-capitalist socio-economic organization that they called a “revolution.” In this alliance of convenience, Kemalism, nationalism, and leftism lived in relative harmony. This odd fellowship changed when the Soviet Union collapsed and Marxism lost its revolutionary character.

Freed from its Marxist links, Turkish nationalism relied on its anti-imperialist vein, pumping anti-Western feelings into the system. Nationalism and statist authoritarianism bordered on a kind of fascism that vehemently detested liberal values. It is no wonder that generals (some, of course) and leftist politicians are uttering fascistic statements that run counter to democracy, the rule of law, and basic liberties.

Turkey has to get rid of this mentality. For the country has neither prospered nor developed enough in democracy and social capital. The foremost task of freeing itself from ideological constipation is to get rid of this so-called left. If there is to be a “left” (and there must be), it must inculcate the values of basic liberties, human rights, the rule of law, social justice (equality before law and services), equal participation of all groups in politics and deliberative democracy. This means internalizing a modus vivendi based on organized society to offset the omnipotence of the state and a political culture whereby the state is subservient to the society, not vice versa.

These are liberal ideals that must replace the illiberal streak in Turkish politics where the Leviathan state rules, unaccountable, and the law of force abides instead of the force of law (tempered with the rule of law). The two trials—one of which has ended—will reveal which way Turkey will go. Will it become a liberal democracy in which those who govern are accountable and abide by the rule of law, or will Turkey go on being ruled by an opaque administrative system beyond civilian control and popular will? The answer will be a response to questions such as can faith and democracy reconcile, can the army be a part of the democratic system, can Turkey become an EU member, etc. Let us keep our fingers crossed, for these are historic moments.



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