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The State and Society
in Contemporary Turkey

Dr Görkem Altınörs
gorkem.altinors@bilecik.edu.tr

* Assistant Professor of Politics at Bilecik Şeyh Edebali University. He holds a Ph.D. in Politics from the University of Nottingham.

The Turkish model has long been considered as a challenge to the orthodox claim that Islam and Western values, such as liberalism, capitalism, modernity, and democracy, cannot be together as they are ontologically incompatible. The electoral success of pro-Islamic AKP in 2002 was welcomed as an example. The AKP was rooted in the political Islamic mobilisation on the one hand, and yet its political discourse was articulated around liberal democracy and free market economy on the other. The AKP's pro-Islamic but still liberal, democratic, and pro-EU rule has been shown as the evidence that the orthodox claim is flawed. However, this did not last forever and something had changed after eleven years. Most of the analysts specialised in the politics of Turkey and the MENA (the Middle East and North Africa) signified the Gezi Uprising in 2013 as a breakdown in Turkish politics in terms of the AKP's transition from a democratic-liberal government to a heavy-handed and authoritarian power cluster. What happened in 2013 that led to the Gezi Uprising? Even in the 2010-2012 period, the AKP was being praised as a transformative and progressive power that would consolidate democratic values and civil liberties in the country among the mainstream-liberal intelligentsia. For instance, in 2010, The Economist was claiming that Turkey is not turning its back on the West[i], as John Peet, the Europe editor of the magazine said: "Turkey has made astonishing progress in the past decade"[ii]. On the other hand, just three years later, following the Gezi Uprising started in Taksim Square in June 2013, it is claimed that the AKP abandoned its progressiveness and turned into a regressive power that rules the country in an authoritarian way. The Economist was then questioning whether the AKP's leader, Erdogan, is a "democrat or sultan"[iii]. Such transformation came by complete surprise and brought the Gezi Uprising under close scrutiny. Was the upheaval really the breaking point of the political climate in Turkey? Was the Gezi uprising a secularist movement against the Islamic AKP? Does the divide between Islamism and secularism constitute the most significant social phenomenon of Turkey? What is the key element of social change in Turkey?

Such questions require a historical focus on the state-society relations in Turkey. The centre-periphery relations approach has long been offered as a

key to understand the state-society interaction in contemporary Turkish politics. "Society has a centre", claimed Edward Shils more than half a century ago[iv]. Şerif Mardin adapted the concept to the Turkish context. According to Mardin, there has been a sharp division between centre and periphery in both the Ottoman Empire and Turkey; and this split has always been the most critical phenomenon of the Turkish politics[v]. He considers the modernisation process of the Ottoman Empire as the Westernization of the bureaucracy[vi]. Basically, he argues that the centre that is represented by the state imposed Westernisation processes towards the society that represents periphery. He applies the same analogy to the Republic as well. For instance, he claims that the coup in 1960 deepened the split between centre and periphery[vii]. He, therefore, concludes that the resistance in Turkey is not rooted in organised labour movements, since they are not simply the only part of the periphery; but the periphery itself is the core of counter-official culture[viii] because of patrimonialism and the absence of civil society[ix]. Metin Heper seeks answers to the antagonism of the *strong state versus weak society* in Turkey[x]. He argues that the state is distinctly separated from society in the Ottoman-Turkish context[xi] and points out two interconnected reasons for why democracy faced difficulties in Turkey. First, the state elites are sensitive to the crisis of integration, and second, they are not sympathetic towards the periphery[xii]. Çağlar Keyder brings social classes into this antagonism and discusses that the history of the late Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic is a class struggle between two classes; the bureaucracy, and the bourgeoisie[xiii]. Finally, Hakan Yavuz incorporated this antagonism with Islamism. He argued that "the Turkish secular reforms not only hyphenated state and society but defined the Republican state against traditional society"[xiv].

It is safe to argue that the works of scholars cited above suggest a separatist understanding of the state and society which juxtaposes the 'Kemalist state elites' with the 'traditional Islamic society', and assumes that there is a conflict between the state and society.

It is safe to argue that the works of scholars cited above suggest a separatist understanding of the state and society which juxtaposes the 'Kemalist state elites' with the 'traditional Islamic society', and assumes that there is a conflict between the state and society. For instance, the chief advisor of President Erdoğan, İbrahim Kalın, defined that the success of Islamism, what he called the "conservative democracy", heralded a movement *from the periphery to the centre* through emphasising society over the state[xv]. Moreover, John L. Esposito argued that there was a transformation of small Islamic marginal organisations

into a new class of modern-educated but Islamically oriented elite, which is defined as a movement *from the periphery to the centre* through Islamic banks, schools and religious publishing/broadcasting[xvi]. It is safe to argue that the major meta-theoretical tool in understanding Turkish politics manifests itself in the *secularists versus Islamists* dichotomy.

This essay identifies four shortcomings of the centre-periphery relations approach that juxtaposes secularists with Islamists antagonistically. First, the state and civil society are considered ontologically autonomous and antagonistic entities. The dualist understanding of the state-society relations does not consider the split between those concepts methodologically but ontologically. Such abstraction results in a conceptualisation that those two spheres appear as two independent entities without symbiotic relationship or with very limited interconnectedness. This is problematic because it obstructs the ability of the analysis to comprehend internal dynamic between the state and civil society, as it neglects their interdependent relationship or downgrades their relationship into a limited dependence. Eventually, it leads to an ahistorical analysis of social change. Second, the dualism also appears at the economic and the political spheres (or in other words, the market and the state) and they are considered separately and antagonistically. The pitfalls of 'ontological exteriority'[xvii], such as the negligence of interdependence and interconnectedness between spheres, apply in these dualisms too. Similar to the first one, this feature causes an ahistorical reading of the relationship of those spheres and prevents us from understanding the internal relations between them.

Third, there is clear favouritism for civil society over the state in those analyses. The antagonistic reading of the state-society relations resulted in an understanding that the state is considered as a heavy-handed, repressive and reactionary entity and civil society is seen as a progressive social force against the so-called 'evil' state. In the literature of Turkish politics, this conceptualisation manifests itself in the rivalry between the 'secular' state and the 'religious' civil society. An understanding based on an always-progressive civil society is problematic because civil society is symbiotically connected to the state; and as the integral state, they produce hegemony together. Civil society is neither a necessarily progressive entity nor the sphere of 'freedom'; it is rather an abstract component of

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the integral state[1] where hegemonic struggles are carried out and civil society groups could be on either side of these struggles, be reactionary or progressive[2]. Fourth, there is a negligence of the social relations of production in the literature. The social relations of production are used in order to describe the class structure – that is, to say the social aspect of the relations of production. However, in the centre-periphery relations approach, the class structure is either neglected and the antagonism is made between identities (such as secular versus religious) or used as a sociological term in which it is utilised to discuss class conflict disconnectedly from the relations of production (such as bureaucracy as a class). I argue that the lack of the social relations of production in an analysis is problematic because the material conditions of societal relations are the bases that determine superstructural spheres such as culture, politics etc. Ignoring the material conditions and attributing the identities as the main source of the conflict would lead us to ahistorical analyses.

At a time when the Gezi Uprising is being demonised as an intervention by foreign governments and criminalised by false and ungrounded shreds of evidences in Turkey, it is crucial to understand the upheaval critically. I argue that neither the Gezi Uprising simply remarks a rupture in the transformation of the AKP into an authoritarian party nor it was an intervention conspired by foreign governments to overthrow the AKP. The Gezi Uprising was a popular response to the AKP's on-going political economy in the 2002-2013 period that has been manifested in Islamic-neoliberalism. False attributions to the uprising are rooted in the centre-periphery relations approach's reading of the state-society relations. It is imperative to employ a holistic and critical understanding of the state and civil society.

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[i] The Economist, 23rd-29th October 2010, p. 21.

[ii] The Economist, 23rd October 2010, *Anchors aweigh: A special report on Turkey*, p. 21.

[iii] The Economist, 8th-14th June 2013, cover.

[iv] Shils, Edward. *Center and Periphery: Essays in Macrosociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975, p. 3.

[v] Mardin, Şerif. "Center-Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics?" *Daedalus* 102, No. 1 (1973): 169-190, p. 169.

[vi] Ibid, 179.

[vii] Ibid, 186.

[viii] Ibid, 187.

[ix] Mardin, Şerif. "Power, Civil Society and Culture in the Ottoman Empire." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 11, No. 3 (1969): 258-281, p. 254-64.

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[1] The integral state is a Gramscian term defines the integrity of state-society, state-market, economy-politics, base-superstructure, consent-coercion, and hegemony-dictatorship.

[2] I owe this definition of civil society to my PhD supervisor, Prof Andreas Bieler.

x Heper, Metin. "The Strong State as a Problem for the Consolidation of Democracy: Turkey and Germany Compared." *Comparative Political Studies* 25, No. 2 (1992): 169-194.

xi Heper, Metin. "The State, Religion and Pluralism: The Turkish Case in Comparative Perspective." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 18, No. 1 (1991): 38-51, p. 46.

xii Heper, Metin. *The State Tradition in Turkey*. Beverley: Eothen, 1985, p. 98.

xiii Keyder, Çağlar. *State and Class in Turkey: A Study in Capitalist Development*. London: Verso, 1987, p. 2.

xiv Yavuz, M. Hakan. *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 7.

xv Kalın, İbrahim. "The AK Party in Turkey." In *The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Politics*, edited by John L. Esposito and Emad El-Din Shahin, 423-439. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 427.

xvi Esposito, John L. *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 20-1.

xvii Morton, Adam David. "The Limits of Sociological Marxism?" *Historical Materialism* 21, No. 1 (2014): 129-158.