Authoritarianism from Above and Below: Exclusive Nationalism and the Turkish-Kurdish Conflict

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Executive summary

The persistence of the Kurdish conflict in the Middle East has created deadly outcomes for Turkey's democratization process and facilitated the emergence of an authoritarian coalition promoting exclusive nationalism from above. While consolidation of the authoritarian rule in Turkey occurred in parallel to the rise of exclusive nationalism and regional militarism, the electoral authoritarian regime is currently facing multiple challenges. As the economic recession deepens, a new wave of ethnonationalism targeting the Kurds and immigrants is in the making, but this time from below. The possibility of democratic change in the future seems to depend on to what extent main opposition parties will be able to distance themselves from exclusive nationalism and build a pro-democracy alliance including the People's Democratic Party (HDP).

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Changing Dynamics of the Turkish-Kurdish Conflict

Until recently, the conventional thinking among Western or Turkish political circles has overwhelmingly relied on two different perspectives to uncover dynamics behind the persistence of Kurdish question in Turkey.[2] Congruent with the logic of counterinsurgency, *security-oriented approach* primarily viewed the persistence of Kurdish issue as an extension of Turkish state's inability to limit violent political mobilization and "win the hearts and minds" of the Kurdish populations. Decision-makers advocating this approach have also viewed the increasing salience of the Kurdish mobilization as a result of the state's inconsistent use of repression while targeting the political wing of the movement.

On the other hand, *a regime-based approach* that hinges on predominant democratization theories has mainly associated the persistence of the Kurdish conflict with a lack democratic representation and consolidation at national level. Conceiving of Turkey's structural democratic deficits as the source of the sustained insurgency, proponents of this approach considered protection of civil and political rights combined with increased state capacity to strengthen rule of law as a remedy for political instability caused by the Kurdish insurgency.

Remaining as mainstream lines of thinking until very recently, both of these approaches have largely produced structuralist accounts of the conflict processes that overlooks the agency and transformative power of the Kurdish movement(s) as well as how mobilizing strategies of the movement have reshaped political coalitions and influenced the trajectory of political regime in Turkey.

Following three inter-related developments which occurred in the last decade, the above-mentioned approaches now have only limited explanatory power to unpack mechanisms recently shaping the

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[2] For an in-depth analysis of where these two different approaches stand in relation to the recent history of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, see Harun Ercan. "Is hope more precious than victory? The failed peace process and urban warfare in the Kurdish Region of Turkey." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 118.1 (2019): 111-127.

trajectory of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict: (1) The failure peace talks between the Kurdish movement and Turkish state (2008-2015); (2) the breakdown of democracy in Turkey (2015-16); and, (3) the rise of Turkey's new regional militarism (2016-2021).

Although these crucial developments are causally linked, we still lack analytical tools necessary to explain mechanisms of change due to heavily relying on "nation-state" as the unit of analysis. Since the Kurdish political mobilization experienced an "upward scale shift" in the last decade —from the local to national, and national to regional—, there is a need for a dynamic-interactive approach that captures not only changes in the scope of conflict but also why the conflict has become so intractable.

Ethnic Authoritarianism and Democracy in Turkey

This commentary develops two arguments to offer a new perspective that explains how the 'Kurdish conflict complex' in the Middle East matters for Turkey's regime trajectory by focusing on the relationship between exclusive nationalism and the level of democracy in Turkey.

First, founding Turkish nationalism has a strong exclusive character that conceptualizes ethnic difference as a domain of continuous warfare while perceiving the non-Turks and/or non-Muslims as perpetual threats to the state and nation. Regarding non-Turkish Muslims, any form of resistance, reluctance or failure to assimilate into prescribed Turkish national identity was historically conceived by the state as an act of disloyalty. In this regard, e*thnic authoritarianism* —particularly codified in coercive state institutions such as the military, intelligence, police, and judiciary—, prevented emerging democratic mechanisms from structuring and absorbing ethnic or religious identity conflicts until the mid-2000s. In other words, the modern Turkey has suffered to a great extent from the historical equivalent of a "birth defect", paving the way for an ethnonationalist backlash against any attempts towards inclusion of the "second-class citizens" into polity.

Second, during the periods of intense political crisis, historically exclusive foundations of Turkish nationalism have been harnessed for the justification of authoritarian practices and discourses in the name of reinstating "national unity". Likewise, even in the absence of an intense political crisis, members of the polity competing for power have also brought enduring identity conflicts to the center by striving to create ethnonationalist mobilizations to leverage their own positions. As a result, internal or external conflicts involving the Kurds, Greeks, and Armenians as parties to the conflict have historically presented *a structural opportunity* for pro-authoritarian coalitions to undermine democracy and bolster the autonomy of the state from civil society.

The Rise of Kurdish Movement and the Resurgence of Exclusive Nationalism

Autocratization usually occurs during the elite's responses to threats their own power. The critical juncture for Turkey's collapse into authoritarianism started with the Gezi uprising (June 2013), continued with a devastating authoritarian counterinsurgency campaign in the Kurdish region (July 2015—April 2016) and ended right after the failed coup attempt (July 2016). Although the AKP had engaged in a fierce political warfare with the ultranationalists (MHP) and secular nationalists (the Kemalists) within military from 2002 to 2015, an authoritarian alliance was formed among these three actors right after Erdoğan's refusal to accept the June 2015 elections results and bringing an end to the Kurdish peace process.

Unprecedented success of the Kurdish movement in June 2015 elections, the creation of de facto regional autonomy in Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan) in alliance with the US, as well as increased hopes for an independent Kurdish State in Iraq operated as the proximate causes bringing the authoritarian coalition together in response to "the rising Kurdish threat" across the Middle East. Since then, the coalition's war against pro-democracy forces, the Kurdish movement ('separatists'), and the Gülen Movement ('agents of the West') helped the ruling elite to subvert democracy and sustain significant mass

support while also facilitating Turkey's slide into a coercion-intensive trajectory.

War-making and Authoritarian Consolidation

The survival of electoral authoritarian regimes depends on whether ruling elites can effectively orchestrate strategies of repression, cooptation, and legitimation to ensure elite cohesion, popular support, and the acquiescence of the opposition. The AKP-MHP coalition successfully managed to overcome all these challenges from 2015 to the 2019, however, not simply by fueling new Turkish-Islamic nationalism. The ruling elite has devised a new authoritarian governance model that hinges on the interplay between deliberate threat inflation, war-making, and undermining the opposition while also garnering popular support through exclusive nationalism.

Drawing on a preemptive and transformative security concept, Turkey's new national security doctrine has blurred the lines between internal and external threats after the authoritarian coalition was forged in 2015. The following statement made by the President Erdoğan summarizes Turkey's new threat ecology as well as its quest for a regional power status:

> "The global system that left its mark on the past century has been shaken of its foundation in a way that impacts all regions and countries. One of the key features of this period is that distinctions between domestic politics and foreign affairs have evaporated".[3]

Following the emergence of a *de facto* state in Syrian Kurdistan, the new security doctrine assumed that ensuring Turkey's national security requires establishing new fronts beyond its own borders[4]

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[3] R. Tayyip Erdoğan. "Türkiye'nin bu dönemde attığı adımlar, önümüzdeki yarım asrı biçimlendirecek öneme sahiptir", 14 January 2020: https://tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/115281/-turkiye-nin-bu-donemde-attigi-adimlar-onumuzdeki-yarim-asri-bicimlendirecek-oneme-sahiptir-

[4] For a detailed account provided by the President Erdoğan regarding Turkey's war-making efforts in Syria, see, R. Tayyip Erdoğan, "İstanbul Milletvekilleri Buluşmasında Yaptıkları Konuşma", 29 February 2020: https://tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/116848/istanbul-milletvekilleri-bulusmasinda-yaptiklari-konusma

since it is threatened by "composite wars"[5]. Parallel to this change, the national security state effectively diminished the disruptive power of both the Kurdish movement in Turkey and the Gülenist movement from July 2015 to December 2016. Nonetheless, the government continued to inflate these threats deliberately and associated the opposition parties with violent political actors to vilify them as complicitous with "the terrorists". In every election held from November 2015 to 2019, the continuity and survival of the State (*"devletin bekası"*) was at the center of political campaigns launched by the AKP-MHP coalition, framing the opposition as the extensions of the U.S. and Europe tasked with undermining Turkey's national interests from within.

As *actual* internal threats begun to fade away, the authoritarian coalition embarked upon war-making campaigns in the Middle East, seeking further legitimacy for the consolidation of authoritarianism. Primarily centering on the "Kurdish threat" in the Middle East, the state's war-making efforts have aimed to generate unifying, centralizing and organizing effects to foster authoritarian restructuring of the state institutions, policies and laws. From opposition parties to civil society organizations, from media outlets to Islamic orders and professional chambers, all relevant political actors were compelled to align with the ruling elite's political agenda and express their unconditional support. As the cost of political repression decreased through ethnonationalist mobilizations, the ruling elite continuously attacked remaining democratic enclaves while political parties, NGOs, and individuals opposing to Turkish militarism were vilified, silenced, and even jailed as the "enemies" of the state and nation. Unsurprisingly, the President Erdoğan's public approval ratings surged when military campaigns resulted in clear victories.

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[5] According to Tarrow, composite conflicts are the new global phenomenon replacing statist wars in the recent decades: "These are wars in which both nonstate and state actors employ a variety of conventional and unconventional means; in which the laws of war are either ignored or twisted out of shape; and in which the distinction between transnational and domestic contention becomes blurred or, in some cases, is totally effaced". See Sidney Tarrow, *War, States and Contention: A Comparative Historical Study* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), p. 103.

Overall, military engagements aggressively pursued by the Turkish state in Syria, Libya, Iraq, Armenia, and the Eastern Mediterranean (2016-2021) have not only been driven by geostrategic concerns of the Turkish state: the ruling elite's goals such as ensuring elite cohesion, popular support, and the acquiescence of the opposition at the domestic level were inherent in the making of these war-making efforts.

Waning Support and the Crisis at the Heart of Authoritarian Regime

Whereas Turkey's authoritarian governance model worked effectively from 2015 to 2019, the AKP-MHP coalition has failed to overcome a number of enduring challenges so far. *First*, given the deepening economic recession in Turkey since 2017, the ruling elite has consistently failed to engender *performance legitimacy* through economic growth and effective governance and thus mainly relied on asserting national power through military campaigns. Offering non-material or symbolic rewards to Turkish masses has its own inherent limitations. The economic downturn, further intensified with the pandemic, continuously reveals shortcomings of the new presidential system, causing more regime followers to withdraw their support.

Secondly, although the ruling elite strived for dismantling the Kurdish movement both militarily and politically, the movement continues to be one of the key political actors in the polity. Because the popular vote for the parties of ruling elite and the opposition bloc is too close, the HDP seems to have much clout than its actual weight. As became evident after the 2019 Local Elections, the opposition could only gain the control of major municipalities in the West with the support of the Kurdish voters. Even though the HDP has been subjected to excruciating repression since 2015 and currently remains on the brink of closure, it is highly likely that the Kurdish electorate will be potential kingmaker in the next general elections as long as elections play a leading role in shaping Turkey's regime trajectory.

As a corollary to these challenges, the ruling elite's monopoly over exclusive nationalism is currently threatened from below. Coupled with negative repercussions of the economic downturn, widespread legitimacy of exclusive and racist discourses after Turkey's ethnonationalist turn have played a leading role in the weaponization of anti-immigration attitudes against the government. Except the HDP, main opposition parties have blatantly supported xenophobic discourses and practices targeting millions of Syrian and Afghan immigrants in order to ride the new nationalist tide emerging from below.

Challenges Ahead

Although durability of electoral authoritarian regime in Turkey is at stake due to the persistence of above-mentioned challenges, the opposition parties have yet failed to come together around a comprehensive program aiming to restore democracy, curb exclusive nationalism, and restrain coercive state institutions. The CHP and IYIP, leading political parties in the opposition camp, have refrained from building an open alliance with the HDP despite their collective success during the 2019 Local Elections. The adherence of the main opposition parties to exclusive nationalism and their lack of a roadmap for the resolution of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict have prevented these parties from forging a powerful pro-democracy coalition that also includes the HDP.

Given the authoritarian system in place, merely focusing on how party politics might unfold in the near future could only provide a limited analysis of probable outcomes. Similar to Turkey's autocratization process in the 1990s, state-led paramilitary groups and organized crime networks, co-opted by the ruling elite in the name of "protecting the state", can be another source of destabilization. Although divisions within the authoritarian coalition have become more visible after the recent defections of certain organized crime networks closely connected with state officials, the extent of elite division is still hardly predictable. Nonetheless, it is possible to argue that the military and the intelligence agency are only

prominent actors within the coalition emerging politically unharmed while both the AKP and MHP are losing popular support.

As the popular support for falters, the ruling elite's embarking on intensifying attacks on the Kurds in Iraq and Syria could be likely in order to prevent further defections from the coalition— if the regional and international actors do not increase the cost of Turkish military aggression. Last, in a country where ethnic and racial divisions were repeatedly instrumentalized to deepen political turmoil, a considerable increase in the number of racially motivated attacks targeting the Kurds and immigrants in the past months is more than troubling and illustrate probable dangers ahead if pro-democracy forces fail to undermine authoritarianism in Turkey.