

Rights Without Liberalism: Turkey as a Test Case (draft version)

Jenny White

Professor, Stockholm University Institute for Turkish Studies

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In reflecting on the rise of authoritarianism and autocracy in the world today, I pondered how the issue of liberalism fits into the discussion. Which is the problem we wish to address: the lack of liberalism or the presence of authoritarianism? How, if at all, are these related? Do we consider them, somehow, opposite sides of the same coin? Can we conceive of a satisfactory democracy that is not founded on individual autonomy, but rather on conservatism, that is, a respect for group norms, perhaps based on religion, ethnic origin, or nationalism? There is, of course, a fear that any society that privileges the norms of a particular group is likely to make rights contingent on group membership and undercut the rights of non-members. This has indeed been a pattern in the past. Still, free individuals equally can choose to be racist, bigoted, sexist or liberal and these hidden transcripts infect their institutions, disguised within seemingly rational explanations. Perhaps the question to ask is what would it take to create a democracy in a conservative, traditionalist society that can respectably manage competing rights, rather than crush the opposition? As you might have guessed, I don't have the answers to this, but with close observation of political processes over time, we can perhaps say something about how the DNA of autocratic leadership is reproduced and may proliferate in a democratic environment.

Turkey is a democracy that, until recently, has had free and open elections in which governments have changed hands among parties with different ideological views and agendas. It has, however, never been liberal. If by liberalism, we mean a culture of mutual toleration and respect for individual autonomy, this has never been the case since the founding of the Turkish nation in 1923. Instead, Turkey has experienced violent cycles of often extreme social and political polarization along variously demarcated religious, ideological and ethnic lines. The political scientist Umut Ozkirimli has described Turkey as an archipelago of communities held together by force. Despite its enforced nationalist message of indivisibility, Turkey lacks shared values and institutions, with each of these communities distrustful and intolerant of the other. Today, it is more polarized among hostile factions than ever. The continual fracturing means that vulnerability is continually reassigned, often along lines that divide people with otherwise similar backgrounds and who share the same discursive field. It's increasingly uncertain who your next enemy will be. This creates unpredictable cycles of vulnerability and oppression.

Turkey's rulers have been unabashedly authoritarian and imposed their agendas from above. Many of these were Westernizing reforms: state-controlled religion supporting a secular lifestyle, women in parliament, a European-inspired legal and educational system. As Turkey's founder and first president, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, reportedly put it, the reforms were "for the people, despite the people". The state delivers what is necessary for modernization, thereby eliminating empowerment. Citizenship consists of duties, rather than rights. Citizens have no voice except at the ballot box.

There is an enduring personality cult around Atatürk, whose image and words and recounted deeds are omnipresent in people's lives. Recently, ubiquitous portraits of Turkey's present leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, have appeared beside those of Atatürk. In 2017, the constitution was

amended to centralize control over nearly every aspect of governance and society in the hands of one man, President Erdogan. Turkish democracy has tended to be a zero-sum game in which the electoral winners, having obtained a majority, get to determine what is allowed and what is banned in social life according to the norms of their communities, with no tolerance for non-conforming practices. The principle is the same whether it is the current Islam-rooted government curtailing alcohol consumption or previous secular governments banning the veil. Just as state institutions in the early republic were stocked with members of approved Kemalist networks, today they are Erdoganist. As ever, benefits accrue to those thinking approved thoughts, and blacklists and detentions ensure that critics and nonconformists are sidelined. Institutions, like the judiciary, educational system, military, and legislature, and even civil society, that would ordinarily balance the varied interests in society, work instead to entrench one set of interests at the expense of another. Turkey's institutions have always been weak, beholden to those in power and easily bent to their purposes, made fragile by continual military intervention. Bureaucracy is a machine of the ruler. Leadership is personal and followers are repaid through patronage, what some might call corruption. Like all parties in Turkey, Erdogan's AKP is essentially clientilistic. It has developed powerful networks in the wealthy cohorts of the business and political worlds, shouldering aside the old elites. All networks are personalized and bring to the table the resources of a person's family and connections and, in turn, their connections, in an enormous inter-nested web of networks and sub-networks. This opens the door to non-state actors taking over the institutions of the state, that is, groups with their own agendas.

Schoolchildren are still taught that the Turkish nation is under continual threat by outside and inside enemies. There is a rotating cast of enemies, but outside enemies include Europe and the US, and inside enemies are Turkey's non-Muslim citizens and Kurds, recently joined by the preacher Fethullah Gülen, whose followers populated so many institutions that the government accused them of setting up a parallel state. All inside enemies are represented as working on behalf of outsiders to undermine Turkish unity, so instances of disunity or when things go wrong in the economy easily find a scapegoat. The fear of ill-intentioned outsiders or inside enemies is stoked by the government, education, and the media. Conspiracy theories abound. Turkish society has a far lower level of interpersonal trust than any other OECD country. Lack of trust, in turn, feeds a fear of outsiders and especially of those who look like us, but mean us harm.

Liberals, in particular, are widely perceived to be people for whom anything goes, who have no boundaries and, thus, uncertain loyalties. During the Gezi protests in 2013, liberal protesters were demanding environmental rights (they were protesting the destruction of a public park to build a mall). They were tarred by the government as hooligans who bring chaos to society and to the economy. I suggest that it is fear of chaos, more than anything, that drives conservatism. If we parse this accusation further, we see that demands for rights, in whatever arena of social life they are made, do indeed pose a threat. They threaten neoliberal elites (the builders of the mall) and conservative traditionalists who respect established institutions and practices, such as those of the traditional family where the young obey their elders and women obey their men. Liberalism brings moral laxity and a breakdown of social order, that is, chaos. In Turkey, even ostensibly liberal secularists can feel threatened by people who demand rights that challenge their secular norms and neoliberal gains.

The anthropologist Fredrik Barth writing about Bali, described what he called a "hidden curriculum" that political activities enact and confirm, one that seems particularly resistant to

change. (Barth) In Bali, this took the form of normative expectations that created extensive pressure on people to conform, obey, and to put the family first and to suppress self-interest and non-normative desires and differences. Part of Turkey's hidden curriculum is a particular leadership style. Leaders often style themselves as heroic figures. In workplaces, managers are expected to listen to their employees to make them feel part of the group, but they are not expected to act upon employee suggestions. (Pasa et al 2001) Similarly, the relations of political leaders to their followers is entirely based on loyalty and obedience to the person of the leader, rather than to an organization, its ideology, rules and procedures, or merit as a marker for leadership and promotion. Disagreements with the leader thus become personal betrayals that require the "traitors" to leave the group, taking their networks with them and later reforming around new leaders in a continual process of fracturing into mutually hostile groups. These dynamics scale up into national polarization and violence punctuated by attempts at consolidation, for instance, through nationalism, constitutional and educational revisions, rallies, and attempts to re-center power. (White 2017)

Erdogan's attempts to eliminate all competing leaders and networks can be seen as just such an attempt at eliminating dissent and imposing unity. Maintaining a functioning government based on personal loyalty and obedience requires continual policing of dissent and results in an endless minting of "traitors" and enemies that populate the "other side". Outside enemies and inside enemies are blamed. New scapegoats are continually identified and sacrificed. Nevertheless, the AKP has begun to fracture. Erdogan is continually sidelining former close associates, including high-level people in his government and AKP mayors of major cities. Some of these figures are now starting rival political parties. The March 31, 2019, local elections confirmed that Erdogan's grip on his followers was loosening as opposition candidates won the mayoralties of key cities. In the case of Istanbul, Turkey's financial capital and main source of revenues that provision Erdogan's networks, even a forced repeat of the election couldn't change the result. The opposition candidate, Ekrem Imamoglu, received even more votes the second time around.

In other words, Turkey's current turn to autocracy is not due to religion or to a leader with an ideological or theological message. Rather, Turkey's personalized culture of group-belonging based on loyalty and unquestioning obedience to heroic leaders explains why a single, exceptional person can be so effective in gathering in the reins of power. Autocracy is not inevitable, only easy.

What is the role of religion? While the AKP is deeply conservative, like much of Turkey's population, and while some, though not all of its leaders are pious, it has never been an Islamist party with a coherent theology or ideology. Its overarching concern has been to stay in power and to pursue a grandiose vision of Turkey as a post-Ottoman world power. The use of Islam as a means of top-down social engineering was found also under the Republican Kemalists, as was authoritarian leadership. AKP has simply pushed this much further.

While religious justification for government policies might please pious voters, the AKP might be overreaching. The party is concerned that pious conservatives are not following the government's playbook. For many pious young people, Islam has become a conscious choice of lifestyle and of issues that concern them, like social justice. Ethical practice can take the form of participation in civil society or education, rather than prayer or membership in traditional Islamic organizations. Exhibiting choice about how to be a Muslim has become an important marker of modernity. A

large variety of industries has sprung up to provide products that guide Muslim lifestyle choices. As far back as 2007, 63% of Turks defined themselves as "modern religious", not traditional religious, that is, as young, upwardly mobile, nationalist, pro-EU, and liberal in views of Muslim practice. () Indeed, recent polls show that an increasing number of young people are rejecting Islam for a non-denominational religiosity. () The Gezi protesters tended to be young and liberal, but also rejected being associated with any particular movement or label. Over the past two decades, both pious and secular youth have been subject to forces, like globalization, travel, media, education, and upward mobility, that create desires and aspirations different from their elders who grew up in Turkey's relatively closed, ideologically straitjacketed society. They are aware of and feel free to choose issues, rather than ideologies, deism instead of Islam, and possibly to repudiate the hierarchical patrimonialism of their leaders. This does not, however, mean that Turkey has moved to a liberal culture of mutual toleration and respect for individual autonomy.

To get back to my original question: what would it take to create a democracy in a conservative, traditionalist society, a democracy that can respectably manage competing rights, rather than crush the opposition? Can this be done despite the hidden transcript of personalized, heroic leadership (which still is widely expected by the public) and conservative views about patriarchal family values that mirror the leader's expectations of citizens' obedience and loyalty.

The new opposition mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem Imamoglu, ran a campaign of what he called "radical love", that is, of unity across societal differences. What is needed more than a message of unity, however, is re-bureaucratization of civic institutions, the point where the government intersects with ordinary people. Bureaucracies should be professionally staffed by people who know how to do things, rather than by someone's nephew. Lower-echelon civil servants should be empowered to take responsibility for their areas of expertise, rather than responding to the personal connections or status of the person seeking their assistance.

Brian Silverstein has pointed out that having distinct public and private spheres is central to a liberal political culture. () In a revitalized public sphere, citizens should be allowed to complain to the media about institutional corruption and to demand accountability. This will constitute the citizen as a person with rights. One chance was missed -- the EU effect that caused Turkey to adjust its institutions in this direction until the process derailed. Radical love may indeed be the right message, with the right leader, one who plays the role convincingly, but who understands that dissent is welcome, not a threat, and who incorporates channels for dissent in the mechanisms of governance. As Soli Ozel told me, it's too dangerous to be an individual in Turkey, because you have no institutions you can rely on to protect you. The key, then, is not liberalism or changes in Turkey's sociopolitical transcript, but -- inescapably at the moment -- heroic leaders who by professionalizing Turkey's institutions can lead the citizenry to recognize their own power. If people trust their institutions, perhaps they can relax enough to trust each other.

References

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