

Civil Society in Turkey: One Hundred Years of Solitude?

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Studies on Turkey's civil society typically highlight the centralist state tradition as a historically inhibiting factor for the underdevelopment of a robust civil society. In this brief article, I aim to address how the Justice and Development Party (AKP)'s 20 years of uninterrupted rule has impacted civil society. To answer this question, I first capture the long history of civil society in Turkey. Then, I draw upon insights from multi-sited fieldwork in Turkey and five European countries between 2017 and 2022 to account for the AKP period.

My argument is two-fold. First, the state has historically viewed civil society with suspicion as it may threaten national security or facilitate "terrorism" and "anarchism." Thus, the state treats civil society and organized citizenry as entities to be subdued or co-opted. Nevertheless, focusing only on the political structures distracts and denies the agency's role. There is still a strong legacy of civil society in Turkey thanks to the contentious and autonomous mobilization of workers and youth in the 1960s-70s and the pluralization of civil society after the 1980 coup. Instead of seeing these periods as brief exceptions to the rule, we should understand that they represent the deep currents of grassroots culture and democratic legacy in Turkey. This legacy

separates Turkey from many countries in the MENA region, where more consolidated autocracies did not allow organized civil society and suppressed attempts of autonomous mobilizations (Yabanci 2021). Second, over the last two decades of AKP-led gradual autocratization, three parallel and conflicting developments in civil society have unfolded: selective repression, cooptation, and contestation. These processes uphold both the statist interventionism and civic contestations of civil society, and yet, autocratization has also imposed ruptures and new paths.

The Historical Development of Civil Society

Any discussion of Turkish civil society compels a debate on the historically rampant role of the centralized state, which dates back to the Ottoman Empire, to account for the "underdevelopment" of the current civil society. Extant studies grapple with the effect of the patron state on the development of civil society, inherited by modern Turkey (Heper 1985; Mardin 1969). They show how the security and unity of the new state were absolute priorities for the republican elites. For instance, during the early years of the republic, women's and workers' organizations were effectively crushed or co-opted by the

Kemalist doctrine of a classless, unified and homogenous nation (Zihnioğlu 2019; Yildizoğlu and Margulies 1984). After the transition to multi-party democracy in the 1950s, the Democrat Party, the first real challenger of the founding Republican People's Party (CHP), allowed for the emergence of trade unions only under the “state-friendly” Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions (Türk-İş). Worse still, the military that regularly seized power once every decade viewed civil society as a cause of chaos and disorder. Particularly, the 1980 military regime eliminated trade unions, associations, and political parties, as well as limiting the freedom of assembly and association.

Yet, despite historical, structural, and institutional limitations, Turkey's civil society also experienced significant periods of emergence, revitalization, and dynamism, such as the 1960s and 1970s labour and youth mobilizations. Strikes persisted for months with leftist trade unions capable of rallying up to 300,000 workers at once (Yildizoğlu and Margulies 1984). Furthermore, the leftist student movement organized sit-ins, protests, and boycotts to demand education reform and the repression of universities. The group became increasingly politicized and even adopted violent means (Feyzioglu 2004). In the post-1980, new mobilizations were driven by professional associations with international connections and Europeanization agendas. This included Kurdish, feminist, and Islamist grassroots movements which advocated for their rights and democratic participation. These civil society actors emerged not because of a change in the state tradition, but despite it.

Enter the AKP: Civil society between repression, cooptation and contention

In 2002, when the AKP came to power, civil society was shaped by two factors. On the one hand, the statist tradition was still dominant. On the other hand, civil society was also growing thanks to new groups seeking to mobilize and the impact of the “civil society hype” of the 1990s. In the post-Gezi protests period, as the AKP's monopolizing agenda turned to slow-motion autocratization, (see Esen and Gumuscu 2016; Akkoyunlu and Öktem 2016), civil society was forced to undergo a significant transformation driven by repression, cooptation, and contestation.

Repression

Over the last decade, civil society has faced deteriorating levels of direct and indirect repression (ICNL 2022). Repression ranges from extensive and additional auditing, frequent fiscal penalties to police and judicial proceedings, closures and confiscation of property, and worse still, accusations of terrorism, money laundering, and foreign intelligence. These repressive measures are often meticulously chosen not to conflict with the law (Scheppele 2018). However, the laws are often the source of the problem. For instance, the current civil society legislation has ambiguous clauses banning organizations "against law and morality" and "the characteristics of the Republic". Similarly, "propaganda of a terrorist organization" foresees imprisonment, but there is neither a definition of terrorism nor terrorist propaganda in the penal code. These elusive clauses often serve as a pretext to target activists and organizations. In fact, organizations promoting gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights faced repression for being against morality. Likewise, many human rights organizations and activists were prosecuted for promoting terrorism.

The crucial issue about repression is that it is

selective. In fact, repression is discriminately and strategically used against organizations or individuals that can create a rippling effect across society about issues that increase the threat perception of the government. These issues include the rights of minorities, social justice, peace and reconciliation, and lately women's and LGBTQI+ rights. When repression is selective, anticipating it is difficult. Hence, my respondents argued that this situation limits mobilization on certain topics and invites self-censorship. Furthermore, selective repression might also prevent solidarity with the repressed.

Cooptation

Power-abusing rulers in hybrid regimes face “civil society dilemma” (Yabancı 2019). Unlike fully consolidated and secure autocratic regimes, they cannot entirely shut down civil society. Probably not because they do not dream of it, but, first, despite having electoral hegemony, they do not have the capacity of controlling civic life altogether. Second, they also rely on a selective form of repression discussed above, a resource-saving and legitimizing yet effective tool. However, the dilemma emerges at this juncture: By not crushing civil society, autocratic regimes cannot prevent politically-alienated groups from establishing themselves through civil society. Their solution is to co-opt civil society so that it does not only acquiesce to the slow-motion autocratization but ideologically engages with it.

This civil society dilemma motivated government-oriented civil society's impressive expansion in Turkey over the last decade. These organizations have some independence regarding their internal activities and membership structures but are organically linked to those in power. They are granted the free-

dom of association and assembly that is denied or limited to others, and they are free to establish grassroots links with society. These organizations have expanded across Turkey, working especially on issues involving youth, education, women, and family.

Despite their professional appearance, these organizations are based on clientelist networks. Those in top management positions benefit significantly from connections with government members in getting perks and benefits. In contrast, lower-ranking members and volunteers hope to gain access to these networks in the future. And yet, there is more to this story than the top-down patron-client relationship between the AKP and government-oriented organizations. With their extensive organizational capacity, they bring the state to society by penetrating everyday life and becoming integrated with their target groups' daily socialization and routines.

How do they do that? They set up such a myriad of institutionalized approaches that I can only discuss a few here. One main practice is organizing camps, summer/winter schools, extra-curricular training, and socialization sites for youth. These daily activities engage youth from secondary school to the university level. At camps, participants learn Quran and Islamic theology for half of the day, the second half is spared for more entertainment and physical activities. However, these activities are always managed in a particular way. For instance, archery, shooting with air rifles, and horse-riding are encouraged as Turkish “ancient sports” over others. There are also regular seminars, talks, and discussions taking place at the premises of these organizations across Turkey. These activities provide what Riley and Fernandez (2014) call “politicized leisure”. Routine socialization exposes young people to

nationalist-conservative narratives of history, nation-building revolving around hostility towards minorities and 'the West', or contemporary politics such as the Turkish army's excursion into northern Syria, the presidential system, and elections.

Government-oriented civil society also runs electoral campaigns in favor of the AKP in Turkey and abroad among the diaspora voters. For the 2017 constitutional referendum, these organizations actively reached out to their target groups to convince them to vote for the presidential system. They set up information desks at key locations in big cities and organized seminars at universities. Volunteers patrolled streets to talk to people, paid visits to shopkeepers and nonworking women at their homes, and created the “taxi for yes” campaign that transported people for free while they were informed about “the advantages of the new presidential system”.

Being constantly mobilized “on the ground” allows government-oriented organizations to form distinct public spaces that continuously reproduce and invent narratives. These organizations serve a critical role in connecting citizens to authoritarian governance by promoting specific subjectivities that not only passively accept undemocratic governance but also actively engage with it through moral, ideological, and mobilization efforts. By actively engaging with their target groups within society, they can observe their needs and desires and offer valuable insights to the government regarding their preferences and grievances. These organizations also demonstrate that the AKP has incorporated civil society into its ruling coalition to embed autocratization further into society.

Contestation

Contestation has been possible amid intensifying repression and a fast-autocratizing system because the more that the AKP has manipulated electoral and partisan arenas, the more dissenting societal forces have turned to civil society in search of alternative organizational forms, creating a complex and pluralistic civil society ecology. Civil society today increasingly resembles a network of horizontally organized, social movement type, informal and ad hoc groups, local collectives, and issue-based regional platforms. To highlight a few, gender movement, labor, and environmental justice mobilizations have accumulated considerable skills and the support of communities in recent years. They follow a strategy of what I called elsewhere a 'tactful contention' (Yabancı 2023). This strategy has developed over years of trial and error. It encompasses (a) informalization to create participatory and democratic internal practices, (b) framing strategy that allows them to communicate their immediate local resentments through more universally resonating claims, and (c) the ability to combine contentious disruptive mediums of action with litigation, public awareness, and democratic innovations across local, regional, national, and online arenas.

Considering the level of repression, many actors pulled out a diverse and innovative action repertoire. They resort to the usual arsenal of social movements like protests, strikes, and demonstrations. Protests, demonstrations, and marches continued even during the two-year-long state of emergency following the 2016 coup, becoming small scale but almost daily (Arslanalp and Erkmen 2020). Besides the traditional repertoire of street action, “off-street” mediums, such as outside lobbying, litigation at national and interna-

tional courts, organization of public sphere, citizen assemblies, election observation, civil disobedience, reclamations of space, agenda-setting through social media, and the facilitation of citizen complaints, constitute the majority of collective action in civil society for women, workers, and environmental justice mobilizations to name a few. Perhaps most importantly, contesting groups within civil society have gained an impressive capacity to switch between these mediums as repression has an extensive range. They adapt to and steer selective repression by switching between different mediums while the target, timing, and duration of repression are constantly anticipated. As one of my respondents said, "If they close one passage, we invent another". Bending but not breaking has become the key to civil society's resilience in Turkey.

Conclusion

After two decades of AKP rule, Turkey's civil society has become a complex terrain where democratic and undemocratic forces can both gain influence. The unpredictability of repression makes it an effective tool, aggravating the expectation of persecution and obliging civil society to prioritize staying afloat, not always visible mobilization. Furthermore, the AKP has also sought to expand and complement its political hegemony by creating a distinct sector of government-oriented civil society. Coopted civil society is a reminder that autocratization involves not only formal institutions but also informal structures. And yet, civil society is also a sphere for challenging autocratic state power, as evidenced by new mobilizations at the grassroots level.

Regardless of the results of the 2023 elections, civil society will continue to be relevant for Turkey. Democratic and autonomous civil

society will need to strive hard to get their claims recognized and acted upon. Even in the possible scenario of oppositional victory, parochialism and internal fighting, due to ideological disagreements, might prevent the oppositional bloc from allying with civil society. But also, the government-oriented ones will require attention. By becoming part of the state or an informal extension of it, government-oriented civil society has gained considerable negotiating power vis-à-vis the state. The AKP so far managed to balance them delicately, distributing perks and benefits to avoid open competition and discontent. If the AKP gets another term, the question is if it has the resources to keep them mobilized, given the dire economic conditions. In the case of an oppositional victory, the question would be how to treat their corrupt clientelist structures during the looming post-autocratic transition. ♦

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