

Before the 2019 elections: Shifting Relations Between Turkey and the U.S. and the State of the Turkish Left

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Left Voice recently spoke with Foti Benlisoy of Başlangıç Dergisi, a socialist organization in Turkey, to discuss the political context and changing dynamics between Turkey and the U.S. in the wake of upcoming elections.



*The sign in the image reads “The watchdog of American imperialism, 6th fleet get out!”, protesting U.S. imperialism during Bloody Sunday (Kanlı Pazar) on February 16, 1969, in Istanbul’s Beyazıt Square. **Image by Gezi Bienali.***

Foti Benlisoy describes the rising authoritarianism in Turkey after the 2017 referendum, the role of Turkey in the Middle East and its rapprochement with Iran and Russia, the upcoming general elections, and the situation in Northern Syria with the Kurds.

Arielle Concilio: With diplomatic tensions increasing between Turkey and the U.S., what do you see behind this shift, and what does the future look like?

Foti Benlisoy: The growing diplomatic tensions between Ankara and Washington can be seen as a symptom of the major changes in the character of the imperial order. The post-Cold War unipolar international order is collapsing with the relative decline of the U.S.’s power as the global hegemonic power and with the rise of new proto imperialisms. Geostrategic competition between major capitalist powers has revived with the assertion of China especially, but also of Russia in the Middle East and in Eastern Europe. This is not a ‘new Cold War’ (to use a popular term of mainstream media outlets) but basically ‘good old’ intra-imperialist competition that triggers major geopolitical shifts. Thus we see the emergence of a new global political architecture with all its tensions and contradictions where previously unimaginable geostrategic realignments are becoming visible. Such an example is Duterte’s Philippines, where you have a traditional pillar of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia suddenly reorienting itself toward China.

There are, of course, major issues between Turkey and the U.S. that cause a deterioration in their relations: The military support the U.S. is providing for the Syrian Democratic Forces, in which the Kurdish PYD-YPG is the major force, is a huge cause for alarm for the Turkish state. The Turkish violation of the Iranian embargo or the purchase of the Russian S-400 missile defense system by Turkey, who also happens to be a key NATO member, are major issues that are poisoning the

relations between the two. One should also add that Erdoğan and his camarilla do believe that the U.S. administration supported the military coup attempt in 2016.

However, all these issues must be seen within the context of the crisis of the global political system. Otherwise we will remain within the confines of a rather limited journalistic approach. Thus the aforementioned tensions must be seen in a context where the relative decline in the U.S.'s power and the rising intra-imperialist competition allows Turkish leadership to acquire some relative autonomy in relation to the traditional constraints of the international political system and thus to maneuver between the U.S. and Russia (or Saudi Arabia and Iran). In that sense, especially after the failed coup, Erdoğan is turning to Russia to try to gain political leverage over the U.S. and the EU (Germany). This is not to say that Turkey will leave NATO tomorrow but that due to the instability of the global political system, it had acquired a hitherto unheard-of level of (relative) autonomy. The U.S.'s reaction to such maneuvers remains to be seen.

AC: What role does Erdoğan want to play among Middle Eastern Arab countries? We can think of the example of the recent meeting of Islamic countries and Turkey's UN vote against the U.S.'s recent recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel?

FB: Erdoğan seeks to present himself as the representative of Muslim people around the globe and as the one who voices the grievances of the Muslim world without any fear or compromise. In this he is following the tradition of the late Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II who during the late 19th and early 20th century sought to politicize the caliphate by using a 'Pan-Islamist' discourse to enhance his international standing. The reaction of Erdoğan against the declaration of Jerusalem as capital of Israel by the U.S. is typical of that attitude insofar as Erdoğan's stance towards the Palestinian struggle is purely opportunistic, and it is dependent upon the ups and downs of Erdoğan's foreign policy needs and alliances.

This was also true in relation to the Arab revolts. The AKP government saw the Arab uprisings as a great opportunity to enhance its regional status. The belief was that Turkey could provide the Arab countries with a model compatible with the priorities of the global system. Through the network of the Muslim Brotherhood, Turkey believed that it could play a determining role in the region and thus could raise its status in the global hierarchy. The fact that the 'unipolar moment' of the USA's hegemony had come to an end and the fact that the Obama administration had "withdrawn" from the Middle East were considered crucial factors that increased Turkey's potential and ability to maneuver. Consequently, Turkey's role as a model country, which would have a leadership position and act in accordance with the priorities of the Western alliance within the turmoil caused by the Arab uprisings, was seen by the AKP strategists as a plausible option.

However, things turned out not to be so easy. As is well known, Libya descended into chaos, and in Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood was dethroned by the military. Syria was the main arena where this policy of the AKP was put into practice. Turkey attempted to bring about a regime change together with its Islamist allies on the ground, yet failed bitterly. Not only did the regime stay in place (of course with the massive assistance of Russia and Iran), but the Syrian Kurds also strengthened their military and political organization to bring a large swath of Northern Syria under their control.

These all were major setbacks for the Turkish government who sought to play the big brother of the "Arab Spring."

Furthermore, the fact that the global jihadist movement proceeded from the periphery to the center of the 'territory of Islam' thanks to the turbulence of the Arab uprisings, caused a radical shift in the Western alliance's strategic priorities. For instance, the U.S., which had had a positive attitude towards regime change in Syria, changed its position due to the ascent of ISIS and began to consider

the preservation of the current Syrian regime as a viable option. In the name of stability, the U.S. has preferred to cooperate with the military in Egypt even though it gave the Muslim Brotherhood a chance in the very beginning. Consequently, the disparity between the priorities of Turkey and those of the Western alliance became more apparent. It is also worth remembering that U.S. national security adviser General HR McMaster himself said recently that “Qatar and Turkey are the new sponsors of radical ideology” and attributed the rise of the AKP in Ankara to Turkey’s growing problems with the West.

With those setbacks, the Turkish priorities in the region changed as well. Turkey had to make the inevitable U-turn in its policy. For example, Turkish policy priorities shifted from regime change in Syria to “fighting terrorism,” i.e. preventing the Kurdish ambitions towards greater autonomy. This change led to a rapprochement with Russia and Iran. Furthermore, the Turkish reaction against the independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan brought Turkey closer not only to Iran but also to the central government of Iraq with which it previously had major differences. Turkey also stood with Qatar (another country that is seen as a sponsor of the Muslim Brotherhood) in its debacle with Saudi Arabia. So although one might get an impression of a continuity in the discourse, this is misleading since there have been major reorientations of Turkish foreign policy.

AC: Last April, the constitutional referendum in Turkey took place, which significantly increased Erdoğan’s power and eliminated the role of the PM. Can you explain this briefly, its consequences, and the significance of what has changed since then?

FB: Erdoğan, when faced with the fragmentation of the ruling power bloc, which became evident with the July 15th failed coup attempt organized by Gülenists, his erstwhile allies, was obliged to form a new alliance with various other political cliques within the state apparatus. The basis of this new alliance was waging war against the Kurds in Turkey and Northern Syria — especially preventing the creation of a “Kurdish corridor” in Rojava. As such, Erdoğan’s 180-degree turn on the Kurdish question gave him leverage in building new alliances and strengthening his position within the state, thereby expanding his social base. Rampant militarism served to render the state of emergency — declared after the July 15th coup — legitimate and acceptable, and also acted like a glue binding together various political cliques with conflicting interests. The result was a series of so-called “national and patriotic” alliances within the state apparatus with ultra nationalists like Bahçeli (leader of the fascist MHP) and Perinçek (leader of the republican-nationalist VP). This gave Erdoğan the chance to present himself as the leader and spokesperson of the state’s united backlash against the Kurds, in the complicated political conditions following the coup attempt. However, had this new alliance become permanent, it would have been necessary to strike a balance among these different cliques, and therefore to share power with them, as was once the case with the Gülenists. At that point, the referendum appeared as the best way to prevent such a power-sharing arrangement, and thus to reorganize the relations between those parties and cliques under the undisputed dominance of Erdoğan.

Now with the ‘yes’ vote in the referendum, the de facto Bonapartist new regime has become de jure. The parliament has been sidelined, and the Erdoğanist regime is ruling through emergency decrees. This is a regime in which the executive branch of the state, under the rule of one individual, has achieved dictatorial power over all other parts of the state and over society. I prefer to describe the current equilibrium of political and social forces in Turkey as a “Bonapartist” one, in which the ruling class, unable to cohere into a unified front, cannot fully establish its hegemony and give a decisive direction to the country. Nor are the popular classes and the working class powerful enough to form a counter-hegemonic force. The ruling class is no longer able to maintain its rule by constitutional and parliamentary means, while the working class is disorganized, incapacitated and unable to affirm its own hegemony. The result is that the state has turned autonomous, and through

the emergence of a powerful political figure (Erdoğan-Bonaparte) ensures the continuation of capitalist domination.

However, this Bonapartist regime cannot be stabilized and is rather fragile due not only to the continuing ideological and fractional divisions within the security apparatus, but also due to the fact that Erdoğan's new "alliances" in state and society are already fraught with antagonisms, as well as the aggravation of conflicts within the capitalist class by the rampant economic crisis and the crisis of hegemony in the imperialist system. Erdoğan presents himself as the savior of the nation and the state. But Erdoğan must actually rise above the social classes and also the factions within the state to be truly a Bonapartist "savior." However, in case he stumbles, other potential Bonapartes may also appear, for instance with the covert support of the grand bourgeoisie, which Erdoğan is unable to fully win over.

AC: Tell us what you foresee with the upcoming general elections in Turkey in 2019?

FB: It is really difficult to predict. First, we do not know if the elections will happen in 2019 or earlier. If the deterioration of the economy continues, Erdoğan will prefer to have early elections in 2018. Erdoğan has created a de facto coalition with the ultra nationalist MHP, but even that does not guarantee a 50% for him. The referendum in April 2017 showed that Erdoğan has serious limitations to consolidate his own base. However, there are serious doubts regarding the fairness of the electoral process. Erdoğan is not the type who will peacefully cede power after an electoral defeat. So greater turbulence is ahead.

Another problem is that the electoral campaign will most probably become a contest between different variations of nationalisms. Against the chauvinism of Erdoğan the main opposition, which is the Republican People's Party, and the new İYİ Parti, which was formed through a split of MHP, also use nationalist themes when discussing the Syrian immigrants or Greco-Turkish relations.

AC: Can you tell us about the situation of the Kurds in Turkey and in Syria? How did Erdoğan's repressive policies intensify?

FB: As I said before, Erdoğan overcame the severest crisis in his political career, triggered by the June 2015 elections, when he lost an absolute majority. The failed coup in July 2016 was met by him with an "anti-terrorism" war, which became a lever for regime-building. The AKP seized the opportunity to restructure the alliances within the state to its benefit and to reorganize the society through a sharp turn towards aggressive policies on the Kurdish question. Thus the Kurdish issue is crucial for the new regime. Within the country, the Kurdish opposition was harshly oppressed. Deputies and mayors were arrested, newspapers and TV stations close to the Kurdish movement were banned, and any activity by the main Kurdish left wing party HDP was met with extreme brutality.

In Syria, the top priority of the Turkish state is to prevent the Syrian Kurds to have an internationally recognized form of autonomy by any means necessary. The Turkish army has intervened directly in Syria twice under the pretext of fighting ISIS but basically to divide and isolate the Kurdish enclaves. A further intervention and an incursion into the Kurdish region of Afrin is also on the table. Such a military offensive against the Syrian Kurds could play into the hands of Erdoğan before the elections by enhancing domestic nationalism and his strong-man profile. However, such a move will bring Turkey into direct armed confrontation with the Kurds in Syria. The U.S., and more importantly most probably Russia, will oppose such a move. However, Erdoğan is a gambler, and he will use all his diplomatic and political cards to get even the tacit approval of those powers to disperse the Afrin canton.

AC: Globally, we have seen the rise of right-wing populist, authoritarian parties with an anti-immigrant, racist, and misogynist discourse. What parallels can be drawn between the increasing authoritarianism in both the U.S. and Turkey?

FB: We should not forget that the birth of (bourgeois) parliamentary democracies was possible not through a linear evolution of liberalism, but by the pressures of two historical counter-currents: namely the working class movement and the anti-colonial struggles. However, in the last thirty years, the enormous decline in the power of the working class to act as a class, as well as the degeneration of anti-colonial or anti-imperialist struggles (taking the form of sectarian / fundamentalist violence in the Middle East or endless civil wars among warlords in sub-Saharan Africa) have hollowed out democracies. The decline of these two waves of struggle (for the time being, of course) has left behind a vacuum, which is now filled by the right — that is, an elitist variant of liberalism and its supposed enemy, the conservative populism of the radical right.

In that sense, there is a continuity between, say, Obama and Trump. The turn towards authoritarianism, racism-chauvinism, and right-wing populism is not a reaction to the neoliberal order itself. On the contrary, it is a transformation of that order as a consequence of its own inadequacy in facing its limitations and contradictions. The same is true for Turkey as well. The mainstream media outlets of the West keep repeating the cliché that Erdoğan was first a democratic, reform-minded leader but then became intoxicated with power and turned into an authoritarian “sultan.” However, Erdoğan’s appearance first as a liberal and then as a right wing populist during his rule was dependent on the characteristics of the domestic power bloc and the international situation in these two separate periods - and not on some imaginary “secret agenda” of Erdoğan’s. The AKP and Erdoğan have managed to make the transition from neoliberalism with pluralist rhetoric to neoliberalism with authoritarian nationalist characteristics without ceding power.

AC: From the protests in Taksim Square to the stage following the coup in 2016, there was an important political turn. How did the Turkish left experience this, and what are their opportunities and challenges today?

FB: Clara Zetkin wrote in 1923 that Italian fascism was “a punishment of the proletariat for failing to carry on the revolution that began in Russia.” If you know Italian history, you will remember that fascism was triumphant only after and because of the failure of “biennio rosso,” which was a period of intense conflict. In the same sense one can say that Erdoğanist Bonapartism is a punishment of the social struggles in Turkey for failing to carry on the uprising in Gezi. Originating in a struggle over the commercialization of common space — not directly a class-based movement, but nevertheless linked to the class struggle — the Gezi uprising and the social and political radicalization that it caused destabilized the previous power bloc. However, the left could not resist a policy of “lesser evilism” (“anybody but Erdoğan”) and an anti-Erdoğanism without clear social or class content. Thus, the radical potentials of Gezi were channeled through electoralism and were stuck in the confines of the mainstream republican-liberal opposition. Therefore, Gezi did not have the breadth to create a new social bloc, a new hegemonic project that relies on the political energy of the subaltern classes.

In times of intense crisis the political center rapidly gravitates between left and right like a pendulum. Thus on the one hand it was Gezi that led to a crisis in the previous ruling bloc and destabilized the political centre but on the other hand its failure led to a radical right-wing reaction. Despite the massive and militant character of Gezi and the struggles that it provoked, they were in general unable to change the balance of forces between capital and labor. That means that they did not provoke a radical shift in the balance of forces that is favourable to the oppressed. So (since we celebrate the centenary of the Russian revolution), as every February without October, our failures led to a certain “Kornilovism” in the face of Erdoğan.

In order to fight back, we need broad alliances for the defense of democratic rights that will transcend the cultural barriers (secular vs. Islamic, Western vs. national/traditional etc.) that Erdoğan's conservative and right-wing populism so successfully maintains. This divide-and-rule policy of "cultural wars" was very effective during the AKP's rule since it made class politics almost impossible. For that, we need to link democratic demands with social and class demands. We also should be aware that political coalitions with liberal-secular mainstream parties and currents against the AKP will play into Erdoğan's hand since it will probably broaden his populist appeal. Of course, we need broad coalitions with the republican-liberal mainstream for the defense of political and social rights. But these should have a temporary character and should target only concrete demands. In other words, these coalitions or campaigns should not have a permanent character; otherwise, it will be impossible to retain the political and organizational autonomy of the radical left.

A frontal assault against Erdoğanism is too difficult at this time. I believe that flanking maneuvers that will target the neoliberal, misogynist, and nationalist policies of the government can create the conditions that will enable the social movements and the left to recover and regroup. For that reason, united front tactics at the level of social struggles (and not only at the electoral level) are crucial. The political balance of power that has led us to increasing authoritarianism can only be altered by changing the existing social-class balance of power in favor of the workers. For that reason, we need to combine democratic rights with social and economic demands and to insist on maintaining the radical left's political independence and strategic autonomy while pushing for broad and open campaigns for the defense of democracy.

Interviewed by Arielle Concilio

P.S.

* LeftVoice. January 04, 2018:

<http://www.leftvoice.org/Shifting-Relations-Between-Turkey-and-the-U-S-and-the-State-of-the-Turkish-Left>

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