

Is Turkey a Democracy?

Written by Luke Godfrey

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LUKE GODFREY, SEP 20 2012

Turkey is increasingly democratic, in recent years having renegotiated its own form of 'social contract' to more accurately reflect the socio-political aspirations of the population and challenge the domination of the political sphere by a secular elite. This has been facilitated by a change in the normative framework and the discrediting of the Kemalist regime. The source of legitimacy for governance is now widely understood to be 'the masses', long marginalised by the political elite and top-down modernisation, rather than the state, although this shift has resulted in tensions across Turkish society.

A Definition of Democracy and Issues with Defining Democracy

Democracy has been a contested concept since first put into practice, and over the course of history has often been viewed negatively. In this regard the context for democracy today is very different, with the concept often uncritically regarded as a universal good, rather than as a particular product of socio-political circumstance. Despite a general consensus over the positive nature of democracy in much of the world (concentrated in the West), its most ardent practitioners can be hard pressed to provide a definition which is not arbitrary, or simply reflecting an ethno-centric viewpoint. Often, democracy is conflated in the West with liberal values, or the concept is affixed with varying descriptions such as transitional or incomplete – these labels raise questions like why is it transitional? Is there then a universal teleological endpoint for all democracies? Additionally the instrumentalist use of 'democracy' such as by the USA in its invasion of Iraq has resulted in democracy "circulating as a debased currency" (Schimnter & Karl, 1991: 75). Given issues with the concept such as these it is no wonder that the meaning of democracy is highly contested and ambiguous.

Schumpeter was one of the most influential democratic philosophers, defining democracy in terms of a specific institutional mechanism such as elections, on the grounds that the 'common good' was too varied/subjective (Knutsen, 2010: 110). Institutions and their associated processes are some of the common criteria for evaluating democracy, although others refer to democracy on the basis of civil rights and liberties or a social dimension related to living standards (Dalton et al, 2007: 144). Many definitions then depend on which of these frameworks or factors is prioritized – unfortunately this makes finding a definition which will find wider acceptance problematic, although Robert Dahl's 'polyarchy' comes close (Dalton et al, 2007: 143). Measures such as the Economist Intelligence Unit's Effective Democracy Index (EDI) attempt to quantify features such as the effective functioning of institutions, but are also prey to criticisms over the appropriateness of criteria used etc. (Knutsen, 2010: 113). Rather than constructing a typology, democracy should be understood as a negotiated concept, within the particular cultural and political context of a society, and with differing outcomes (Dalton et al, 2007: 152). Norms, values and institutions all play a role in the adoption, and expression of democracy – "What distinguishes democratic rulers from nondemocratic ones are the norms that condition how the former come to power and the practices that hold them accountable for their actions." (Schimnter & Karl, 1991: 76). Schimnter & Karl identify broad participation, access to the political sphere not substantially limited by power structures or economics, and responsiveness (of the rulers) to influence from society, as integral to the concept of democracy (Schimnter & Karl, 1991: 84) and it is these criteria that will be used to evaluate the particular case of Turkey.

An Artificial Turkish Identity

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Any discussion of democracy in Turkey requires an understanding of the socio-political context, given that some non-democratic aspects have been embedded in the state from its genesis. Since the creation of The Republic of Turkey, the state has followed the path of secular modernisation, along Western lines, as set out by Kemal Ataturk. This prioritised the creation of a strong and homogenised nation-state, led by a political elite, whilst the military assumed the 'guardianship' of a constructed Turkish identity as well as more conventional security duties (Bulut, 2006: 128). This top-down approach marginalised the positions of those outside of the elite, meaning there was no need to reconcile the different perspectives and interests of wider society (Gurbey, 2006b: 9). Legitimacy lay in the military and the state by virtue of their role in the struggle for independence, rather than based on participation. Nationalism and construction of the 'Other' (usually Kurds and other non-Turkish identities) has for much of Turkish history been the primary means of political reproduction, allowing an elite to remain in control through casting others as a threat to the state (Bulut, 2006: 127) – a particularly effective tactic whilst the state enjoyed support as legitimate in and of itself, this meta-politics characterised as “derlin devlet” – the profound state (Gurbey, 2006a: 158).

The Turkish nation-state, and identity was a product of top-down control by the elite, rather than an organic product of society. This goes some way towards explaining the authoritarian structures of Turkish society up to the present day – they were validated by the legitimacy of the army and the state, but were also a requirement in the artificial construction of communal identity by Kemal Ataturk and his followers. The creation of the Turkish state brought together a wide range of groups and identities including two distinct groups, the Kurds and the Alevi's, but which were seen a threat to the strong nation-state and homogeneous Turkish identity. This perception of identities other than Turkish as a threat led to the institutionalism of suppression of those identities and autonomous civil society by the state (Gurbey, 2006b: 3). The state has long denied the legitimacy of groups that threaten the centralised authority and position of the elites (Gurbey, 2006b: 16), alienating and polarising large sections of society (Ahmadov, 2008: 18). An institutionalised and undemocratic Kemalist regime lies at the heart of the Turkish state, illustrated by bodies such as the National Security Council – “Established by Article 118 of the 1982 Constitution, the Council provides the military high command the opportunity to influence, pressure, and often dictate to the government in matters of national security [security defined very broadly].” (Ayoob, 2004: 458).

The Role of Religion and Fundamental Schisms in Turkish Identity

One of the key parts of the modernising project was the idea of a secular state, and this has been one of the flashpoints for societal tensions and coup d'état in Turkey, making it also key to the understanding of democracy in Turkey. The 1921 constitution sidelined and dismantled much of the social structure of religious society (Carkoglu & Kalaycioglu, 2007: 13). The division of Turkish identity from the religiosity of much of society created a paradox at the heart of the state, and one that was emphasised by the disparity in both power and perspectives between the secular centre and the more religious periphery (Carkoglu & Kalaycioglu, 2007: 66). Although few appear to support an Islamic state many regard religious people as oppressed by the state (Carkoglu & Kalaycioglu, 2007: 159). Secularism takes a unique form in Turkey, aggressive rather than neutral, with the state actively attempting to suppress independent expressions of religion across the public/private divide (Seufert, 2006: 137). Despite the construction of Political Islam as the 'Other', it has also been instrumentalised by the state, from the time of independence where Islam was a factor in the support of the Kurds and Alevi's of the liberation struggle to the current day. Rather than the state being wholly secular it has a large department, the Diyanet, which co-opts and subjugates religion in Turkey through control of mosques and approved teachings etc. (Seufert, 2006: 139).

Religion, like other aspects of Turkish society, is held subservient to the needs of the state, and the contradiction of a denial of religion whilst it remains a key part of society feeds the need for authoritarian methods of control given that this contradicts the norms and values underpinning attitudes amongst much of the population (Ayoob, 2004: 451). “The dichotomy between Islam and Turkish national identity is largely the creation of the secular elite, which considers itself to be the repository of Kemalist wisdom.” (Ayoob, 2004: 456). Unless the two can be reconciled the conflict between the two will remain a key obstacle to democratisation in Turkey, state structures and legislation imposing constrictions on much of society. This conclusion can be illustrated by the recent example of the Welfare Party, which was limited by the 'February 28th Process' and then closed down on the basis that it was a threat to the constitutive principles of the Turkish state (Gurbey, 2006b: 16). The AKP has made some progress in breaking down the artificial construction of Islam as a threat to the nation-state, and this will be discussed further in section 5.

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Economic Failures and the Undermining of Legitimacy

Turkey has had a tradition of political participation dating back to the 1840's, and elections were embedded in society by 1945, to an extent (Carkoglu & Kalaycioglu, 2007: 13). However politics until recently remained dominated by an elite, participation and access remaining constrained, with parties regularly outlawed and coup d'états against elected officials on the basis of the military's status as 'guardians' of the constitutive principles of the state (Bulut, 2006: 127). Leading up to the economic crash the secularist parties remained hostile to wider political participation and scrutiny of their actions, the system remaining one of closed patronage and alienating those isolated from it (Carkoglu & Kalaycioglu, 2007: 139). As the establishment appeared unable to meet the needs and expectations to manage the economic crisis this contributed to a further reduction in legitimacy for the status-quo system. The constructed Others, including the spectre of Political Islam, lost their salience as important issues for many voters, in part due to the state's own success in eliminating threats such as the PKK leader Ocalan.

More immediate economic problems came to the forefront, the Kemalist regime and associated parties discredited by their mismanagement, whilst the state lost its somewhat deified status as a result of reliance on the EU and IMF for rescue (Bulut, 2006: 130/1). This weakened the Kemalist discourse, but did not topple it entirely – instead there are dual forms of legitimacy contesting the other, the AKP drawing its legitimacy from democratic participation to push its agenda (Gurbey, 2006a: 158). It is these failures of the state which created the opening for new forms of governance, via democratic processes rather than the authoritarian state which brought about the economic crisis. "Turkish society was in search of an option that would offer something new and it wanted politics that addressed its worries and longings, not those of the rulers." (Meral, 2010: 8). From 2001 the state could no longer operate in isolation from society, and as such can no longer oppose democratic reforms with the same degree of effectiveness as it lacks the legitimacy to do so in the face of a politicised and dissatisfied public.

The AKP and a Hostile State

The AKP's election was not regarded by all as a step forwards for democracy, given its 'mildly' Islamist character it was suggested by many that the party was simply biding its time until it could convert Turkey to an Islamist theocracy. Commentators in the West regarded the 2002 with alarm, due to their own prejudiced perspectives against Islam (Meral, 2010: 20). However the AKP has positioned itself behind democratic values and human rights, focusing on political advantage rather than religious issues explicitly (Seufert, 2006: 144). By doing so the AKP has a position from which it can attack the Kemalist elite, whilst defending itself from accusations of wanting to 'Islamise' the state (Dagi, 2008: 28). Although it has introduced reforms from this position it has been occupied in power struggles with 'the deep state' and has to operate within the structure of a state which is largely hostile to it, battles in the courts and public statements illustrating the breadth of the struggle (Meral, 2010: 25). Organs such as the President's office, when held by Ahmet Necdet Sezer vetoed legislation in the name of the state, in opposition of democratic processes (Meral, 2010: 10). The AKP has, and continues to compete against institutions, which derive their legitimacy from the Kemalist state, and the military imposed constitution. After nearing ten years in power the AKP is still seen by some as half-heartedly committed to democracy, with reforms not going far enough or addressing the right issues (Meral, 2010: 17). The limited progress may stem from the continuing struggle with hostile elements such as the judiciary and military. Constitutional reform was watered down by the Constitutional Court, and only passed through referendum when it was fully blocked by the state apparatus – again illustrating the division of power and legitimacy in Turkish politics (Meral, 2010: 15). Despite progress in democratic reforms, to the extent that the EU opened accession negotiations, concerns are raised by some of the actions of the AKP – "Erdogan's Putin-like power reflexes included pressure on the media and punishment of those that were critical of the AKP." (Meral, 2010: 18). However, despite incidents with the media etc. the AKP has demonstrated a stronger commitment to democratic practices than its predecessors. "It has also demonstrated that the assumed dichotomy between secularism and democracy conjured up by the Kemalist elite in order to justify authoritarian secularism is false." (Ayooob, 2004: 463). After winning 3 elections it shows that it reflects the aims and aspirations of society, whilst the reactive Kemalist & military elites do not.

The Challenge of Minorities

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Central to the evaluation of democracy in Turkey is the treatment of minorities with identities independent of the national Turkish one. For this the Kurdish minority are taken to be representative. On this front the signs are not as encouraging, with the AKP attempting little more than symbolic reform, leaving in place restrictions on minority access and participation. This can be seen in the AKP's flirtation with easing restrictions on minority issues, which have not achieved much other than cosmetic reforms such as allowing television to broadcast in Kurdish. Extensive restrictions on Kurdish expression, from statutory limitations to violence show just how far this area still has to come, and this failure undermines democratic standards elsewhere (Gurbey, 2006a: 160).

"However, some demonstrations in the south-east of the country related to the Kurdish issue continued to be marred by violence. Difficulties with the implementation of the Law on the duties and legal powers of the police, adopted in 2007, are still being reported, especially in the south-east. Impunity remains a problem for effective judicial and administrative investigations against members of the security forces who are involved in excessive use of force." (Commission, 2010: 21).

This short extract from the European Commission shows some of the issues and restrictions still facing minorities, both formal and informal. An AKP amnesty for ex-PKK fighters was not upheld, undermining the view that Turkey could come to accept pluralism and diversity outside of the homogeneous Turkish identity (Meral, 2010: 14). The ten per cent nationwide margin for parties has left a substantial portion of the population unrepresented in electoral politics since 1987 (Carkoglu & Kalaycioglu, 2007: 40), parties are still closed down by the state, and restrictions on civil association remain. "Despite the reforms, the Turkish policy towards the Kurds remains full of contradictions." (Gurbey, 2006a: 161). Similar restrictions affect the Alevi's who practice a different variant of Islam to the one endorsed by the state. In December 2010 the Constitutional Court dissolved the Democratic Society Party, banning 37 members for acting against the 'indivisible' state, setting back the administrations 'democratic opening' for engaging with minorities (Commission, 2010: 7).

Conclusions

Today much of Turkey's political system can be characterised as being democratic, and particularly under the AKP has been making considerable steps in further reforms. Both formal and informal participation in politics is quite high, surpassing some of the 'consolidated' democracies of the West (Carkoglu & Kalaycioglu, 2007: 18). A pluralist political structure allows for motivated actors to interact with the state to a greater extent than under previous administrations (Carkoglu & Kalaycioglu, 2007: 109). Despite progress there is still the potential for the military to intervene, and there is 'repression potential' latent in the political/legislative structure of the state (Carkoglu & Kalaycioglu, 2007: 111). Reforms have chipped away at the authoritarian structures built up over the years, but the process is likely to remain in flux as different groups compete in interpretations of the constitutive principles of the state (Gurbey 2006a: 157). The difficulty facing the AKP in reforming a constitution imposed by the military, despite their own democratic mandate, shows just how strongly some aspects of the Kemalist regime are embedded in the state structures. That they succeeded is a positive step – in Erdogan's own words, "We have passed a historic threshold on the way to advanced democracy and the supremacy of law," (Erdogan, 13/09/2010). The European Commission was less ebullient "*Overall, the constitutional amendments are a step in the right direction . . . However, broad public consultation involving all political parties and civil society, with their full engagement, is needed to strengthen support for constitutional reform.*" (Commission, 2010: 8). Elected bodies though are still restricted by this wider structure, the Kemalist value framework dominating discussion of constitutive aspects of the state. In the case of the AKP it is more tightly prescribed in case of a repeat of the February 28th Process, with court cases already brought along these lines although they were unsuccessful (Meral, 2010: 25). In the cases of minorities such as the Kurds Turkey still fails to apply the same democratic standards as in wider society, and this is one of the failings which must be addressed if Turkey is to call itself democratic rather than democratising. A characterisation such as "The wave of democratisation that swept over much of the world in the 1990's appears to have bypassed Turkey." (Kubicek, 2001: 34) now appears mistaken, but it would be equally mistaken to say that Turkey is on its inexorable way to full democracy (however it is defined). Instead the situation is fluid and may move towards further democratisation or away from it, especially given the 'strained' political situation in the words of the European Commission (Commission, 2010: 7). On the current analysis Turkey is largely democratic, allowing for participation and access through regular elections and other representative systems that help to determine the political discourse,

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and in a way seen as legitimate by most of society despite some key limitations in the areas of minorities and the influence of appointed rather than elected officials.

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