Why Turkey is Authoritarian

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From Atatürk to Erdoğan

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Introduction

Turkey is the kind of country that exercises a distinct fascination. But it is also a country that lends itself all too easily to exoticism. Turkey is invariably a place where 'East meets West', where secularism and 'Westernization' fatefully collide with Islam. For the last century, the Western world has regarded Turkey as a pivotal case of the 'clash of civilizations' between Islam and the West. But East and West are slippery categories, and there is another story to be told, one obscured by the 'clash of civilizations' and the tug of war between secularism and Islam, and which explains why Turkey is authoritarian: the continuity of right-wing rule. This book will shift attention away from 'clashes' and ruptures to the structures – social, economic and ideological – that have sustained an undemocratic regime, from the secularist Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish republic, to the Islamist Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who, superficially, represents his antithesis.

Turkey was a nationalist-bourgeois one-party dictatorship from its founding in 1923 until 1950, when the first free election was held. And it has remained a bourgeois regime. Some readers will object to this terminology – why bourgeois? – but it is crucial to recognize the class character of the Turkish regime. It is occulted in the standard histories, but as this book will show, the interests of the class that owns the means of production have been decisive in shaping Turkey's historical journey, to the detriment of the development of democracy. The founders of the state, the military officers and bureaucrats,

specifically endeavoured to create what they called a 'national bourgeoisie'; indeed, as will become clear in what follows, this was their overriding objective. From 1960 to 1961 and from 1971 to 1973 the military was in direct charge, but its rule during these periods was tempered; not every political party was banned, and in the later period the elected parliament remained open as well. From 1980 to 1983, Turkey was a full-blown, right-wing military dictatorship. Let us be precise: it was a neoliberal and nationalist dictatorship. Otherwise, the rulers of the country have enjoyed democratic legitimacy. Yet a fully developed democracy has nonetheless continued to elude Turkey, and democratically elected leaders have trampled on freedoms and resorted to oppression. Erdoğan is the latest example of such a ruler. His regime has been described as an example of 'illiberal democracy'. But, clearly, Turkey's political regime has overall been characterized by one form or another of authoritarianism, running from the most unrestrained, with no tolerance for any free expression of the people's will, to more 'tempered' versions with a semblance of democracy; hence the title of this book.

I will argue that the answer to the question why Turkey has remained authoritarian is to be found in the permanence of right-wing rule and in the dynamics of capitalism that have destabilized democracy. The right has come in different incarnations – secularist or Islamic – but always with the same mission, to protect the dominant economic interests from democratic challenges, from the broad masses of the people. A closer look reveals that secularists and Islamists are in fact two sides of the right. And for most of the time, there has been no proper left with a mass following to challenge authoritarian right-wing power.

Anyone who has followed international politics even casually during the last couple of decades will be familiar with what is in fact a fictitious narrative: media and 'experts' have been telling us that, in Turkey, the military stages coups, or used to stage them, in order to 'protect secularism'. Yet the truth is that the Turkish military and the Islamists have more in common than appearances would suggest. Overall, they have both served capital. Neither has the main axis of conflict in Turkish politics been that between the military and civilians, as the standard history holds. Whether ruled by secularists or Islamists, by the military or by the civilian right, Turkey has fundamentally remained the same: nationalism and capitalism have been the pillars of what has always been a right-wing regime, albeit with varying accents of cultural and religious conservatism.

When in 2007 Turkey was for the first time about to elect a president whose wife wore the Islamic headscarf, hundreds of thousands of secularist Turks took to the streets in mass protests. They marched carrying huge portraits of Atatürk. They idolize him because they believe that Atatürk, in the words of his British biographer Patrick Kinross, 'transported his country from the Middle Ages to the threshold of the modern era and a stage beyond'.[1] They were convinced that the Islamist strongman Erdoğan was going to return Turkey to the Middle Ages. Yet while ordinary, secular middle- and upper-class Turks were traumatized by the prospect of having a first lady who wears the Islamic headscarf, it was 'business as usual' for the secular big barons of Turkish capitalism, even though they are also 'Westernized' in the sense that the word is understood in Turkey: they use alcohol, and their spouses do not cover their heads. Yet the 'Westernized' circles of

Turkish big business endorsed Erdoğan early on. His religious conservatism was never an issue for them; on the contrary, it was, as one business patron pointed out, an asset. Many in the West believed that Erdoğan was going to bring democracy to Turkey; they have been thoroughly disappointed. But Erdoğan has lived up to his pledge to capitalism, pursuing the business-friendly policies he had promised he would execute.

Turkey has from the beginning been an inhospitable terrain for the left. Oppression has always been severe. But that is not the whole story; oppression is not the only reason why the left has been crippled. In a 2016 survey, two thirds of the population of Turkey identified themselves as pious, nationalist and conservative and less than one third as either leftists, social democrats or socialists. As a rule, the masses have rallied to populist conservatives who on the campaign trail have spoken to their religious feelings and resentment of the elite, while in power serving the interests of that elite. So, what's the matter with Turkey? In fact, the country is not unique.

In his now classic account, *What's the Matter With Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (2004), the American journalist Thomas Frank described the French Revolution in reverse that has taken place in the United States since the 1990s, where the *sans culottes* have poured down the streets demanding more power to the aristocracy, electing plutocrats to the White House. Frank described how the right has marshalled popular cultural anger to secure the economic privileges of the rich, how the poor vote against their own economic self-interest because they are distracted by social and cultural issues like gay marriage, abortion and guns – questions that have alienated the working class from the progressives. The left in Turkey has similarly been crippled

because, historically, it has been identified with opposition to religion and tradition, which has isolated it from the broad masses, the workers and the peasants.

The Turkish left has come with a heavy baggage: the secularist legacy of the founding, Kemalist era of the country. Socialists and social democrats, and occasionally even Marxists, pledge allegiance to Kemalism. It was a revolution from above, carried out by middle-class, state cadres, that made Turkey, and this has shaped progressive thinking. Social and labour issues, the concerns of the working class, have taken a backseat to middle-class radical priorities: progress, 'enlightenment', modernization and nation-building. The Kemalist left has not only been incapable of challenging the dominance of the right because it has been disconnected from the popular classes; its embrace of nationalism and statism has also legitimized and served to sustain an authoritarian political culture. Its nationalism has if anything exacerbated the ethnic polarization of Turks and Kurds. As we will see, leftists of this particular mould have tragically even made common cause with the nationalist far right.

The historical record of comparable countries like Greece, Spain and Portugal illustrates that social democracy plays a crucial role in the passage from right-wing authoritarianism to democracy. In the 1970s, when these other southern European nations were moving toward democracy, social democracy was on the rise in Turkey as well. It was, as we shall see, a European-style social democracy that reinvented the progressive tradition of Turkey; it challenged inequality and social injustice, rather than religious culture and tradition, and it was therefore successful. But Turkey was not allowed to follow the paths of Greece, Spain and Portugal. Between 1975

and 1980, the left was crushed by the onslaught of the right: fascist death-squads and a brutal military dictatorship extinguished hopes for freedom and social justice. The vengeance of the right ensured that the interests of the capitalist class – and, not unimportantly, the strategic interests of the United States – were safeguarded. The Turkish left of the time was a casualty of the dynamics of capitalism and of the Cold War; Islamic conservatism has been their beneficiary.

The left has never recovered from that devastating blow. Turkey's main opposition party today calls itself social democratic and is a member of the Socialist International; yet it is still to find a way to win over the working class from the right. The Republican People's Party (CHP) was founded by Atatürk himself, and is secularist-nationalist rather than social democrat; it has its main support base among the secular middle class and it shows scant interest for working-class issues. 'We are the soldiers of Mustafa Kemal' is a favourite slogan among party activists today.

The other main strain of the Turkish left is a liberal left that ignores the working-class perspective as well. While the Kemalist left has embraced the state as an engine of progress, its antithesis, the liberal left, is an advocate of 'bourgeois revolution', maintaining that the middle class will bring democracy to Turkey. When Erdoğan's party, which is supported by both the middle class and the working class, rose to power, the liberal left rejoiced; in the words of one leading, self-professed socialist intellectual, 'a real bourgeois revolution' had finally taken place in Turkey.[2] Incongruously, the liberal leftist intellectuals championed the Islamic right because it represented a class that they assumed had a vested interest in political liberalization: a new, 'globalized' bourgeoisie, a rising

class of businessmen and industrialists. The tragedy of the two dominant strains of what passes for the left in Turkey is that they have both legitimized right-wing authoritarianism; the Kemalist left by embracing nationalism and statism, and the so-called liberal left by cheering on an Islamic right that was held to be liberal.

Turkey is yet another case illustrating that freedom for capital certainly does not translate into political freedom, as liberal theory has held for the last two centuries. On the contrary, as we will see in what follows, dominant economic interests have historically interplayed with and helped to sustain authoritarian rule in Turkey, regardless of whether the regime has been secular or Islamic. Ultimately, Turkish history is instructive for a left facing the global challenge of a rising populist right, which succeeds in mobilizing culture and identity for its own purposes. The story of Turkey – where the right has, for most of the time, succeeded in monopolizing the working-class vote by playing on religion and culture – is being replicated across Europe and in the United States. The European and American centre-left's inability to hold on to their working-class base paves the way for the far right. In many countries, social democrats have abandoned the working class, as traditional social democracy has merged with neoliberalism and globalized free-market policies since the 1980s. But serving the interests of global capitalism is not paying off electorally: in 2016, European social democratic parties lost 12 out of 18 national elections. In the 2017 elections in Germany, which saw the far right surge, the social democrats collapsed, turning in their worst performance since the Second World War with little more than 20 per cent of the vote. There is a growing awareness that the solution lies in returning to the

core strengths of the left, that the best thing the left can do is fight its own battles for social rights, solidarity and equality. Yet in an age of cultural anxieties, fed by austerity and terror alerts, far-right populism offers an intoxicating brew; the far right has become the party of the working class in countries like France and Sweden.

Turkey is a warning example: it shows how the left can be disabled when the right succeeds in recasting class conflict as culture war, exploiting the detachment between the popular classes, the uneducated rural population and the working class, and the urban elites. The future of democracy will depend on the emergence of a reinvigorated left that embraces the cause of the people, of the working class and of minorities, and which by speaking up for social justice and freedom succeeds in reconciling social and cultural claims. It is particularly useful to ponder the Turkish case, because it illustrates the fact that the left must be able to connect culturally with the popular masses if it is to make a difference.

CHAPTER ONE

A Pattern of Violence

'This is a Bloodstained Square'

The moment the first of the two bombs goes off is captured on a video clip: a group of young people are joined together in an embrace, performing a traditional Anatolian folk dance. Eerily, they are singing 'This is a bloodstained square'. They exude happiness, however, and the atmosphere is festive. Then, suddenly, there is a blast behind them. There are flames, and the blue, sunny sky is shrouded by a cloud of smoke that quickly expands. The dancers cast a quick glance backwards before diving for cover. The picture is blurred.

On 10 October 2015, over one hundred leftist peace activists, Turks and Kurds, were blown up in Ankara. They were assembling on the square next to the train station in Ankara when the two suicide bombers struck. The activists had heeded the calls of several trade unions and of the pro-Kurdish and socialist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) to protest against the war that the Turkish military was waging against Turkey's own Kurdish citizens in the south-east of the country, laying waste to entire towns. The massacre in Ankara is the deadliest terrorist attack in Turkey to date. Yet it was anything but atypical in terms of what it stood for politically. The carnage fitted all too well into a pattern of mass killings since the late 1960s: the victims are invariably leftists, other

democrats, or ethnic and religious minorities. The perpetrators are drawn from the country's deep, popular reservoir of ultra-conservatives and ultra-nationalists. Those who commission the massacres and the assassinations lurk in the shadows.

The Ankara massacre followed on the killing of over 30 young socialists in a suicide bombing a few months earlier. On both occasions, the authorities identified the perpetrators as Turkish citizens who they claimed had acted on behalf of the so-called 'Islamic State'. The latter, however, did not claim responsibility for the Ankara massacre. Progressives and liberals felt they had good reason to suspect that the suicide bombers in Ankara had acted with the encouragement, or at very least the protection, of the Turkish state. To many, it seemed obvious that history was repeating itself, that elements of the infamous Turkish 'deep state' – the right-wing networks of conspirators and assassins embedded within the state – had been reactivated to crush the Kurdish and Turkish left. Hasan Cemal, a prominent liberal journalist, wrote that he harboured no doubt at all that President Erdoğan's regime had brought the instruments of the deep state back into use.

The lyrics of the song that was interrupted at the peace rally in Ankara in 2015 – 'This is a bloodstained square' – referred to Beyazıt Square in Istanbul, where two young leftist demonstrators were slain by a fascist mob on 16 February 1969. Establishing a pattern that was to be repeated many times, the police stood by passively, and the perpetrators, none of whom were brought to justice, were defended by a right-wing government that blamed the victims for what had happened. In the same vein, the Islamic conservative government in 2015 displayed no empathy for the victims, instead accusing the