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On Turkish elections and the political economy of state-orchestrated violence

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Introduction

The results of the snap elections in Turkey have taken everybody by surprise. This is not because observers with a critical eye have failed to read the script correctly. Rather, it is because of the extent to which state-sponsored terror has proved effective in cajoling the electorate in Turkey to give their oppressors a mandate to rule in return for a ‘breathing space’. At the end, the ‘us or hell’ threat has worked because the ‘surprised’ observers have failed to react in time to the ruthless elimination of institutional checks and balances by the ruling AKP and its president.

The electorate in Turkey cannot be blamed for reverting to instrumental rationality in the face of existential threats, which they have experienced as state-orchestrated violence. Indeed, the threat was made so clear by the ruling AKP and its president that the risk of civil war (perceived as ‘Syrianisation’ of Turkey) became a major concern.

As a result, a critical section of the electorate opted for granting the AKP another chance hoping that irreversible damage could be avoided. I find this similar to the support lent to bank bail-outs in Europe and the United States. In both cases, the calculation was that we stand to lose more from total collapse compared to our losses due to giving the perpetrators of the crisis a second chance. Such collective reactions are unorganised and as such cannot be perfected through prior deliberation. Therefore, we can judge their consequences only after the event.

We now know that the bail-outs have secured only limited reform of the banking system. Indeed, the perpetrators of the crisis have turned out to be the main beneficiaries thanks to massive liquidity injected into the banking system through near-zero interest rates and quantitative easing, with little or no measures taken to ensure liquidity benefits the real side of the economy too. Bailing out the AKP government in Turkey is not likely to produce better outcomes in terms of stability, fairness and justice. In what follows, I will discuss why this is likely to be the case by examining the evolution of the AKP rule and the way in which the European Union, the international organizations and the markets have failed to recognise let alone punish the institutional cull that the AKP rule has inflicted on Turkey.

The West’s darling did not turn ugly over night

Let me begin by calling a spade a spade. As I [argued](#) in 2008, the AKP has not been an institution-building party. It inherited the economic governance institutions (and indeed the

fiscal and monetary policy priorities) of the preceding coalition government led by Mr Ecevit from 1999-2002. It is important to note that the inherited policy and institutional framework had been adopted under duress from international organisations, essentially to fill the institutional void that had been created by successive conservative governments in the 1990s. Successive AKP governments under the leadership of Mr Erdogan have taken the dislike of institutions by the populist conservative right in Turkey to new level: a full-scale institutional cull aimed at removing checks and balances necessary to prevent electoral democracy from degenerating into majority rule by dictate.

In contrast to the urban myth that the AKP has been successful in combining economic growth with democracy, the reality on the ground has been that economic growth continued at comparable or even lower levels with similar-size economies whilst successive AKP governments have been busy establishing full control on the judiciary and the media and engaging in foreign policy actions that violate the norms of the Westphalian state system.

This has been driven by a simple logic: for the AKP elite, institutional checks and balances are dysfunctional because they make the exercise of the ‘national will’ cumbersome. Given this mind set, the AKP elite has sought to define not only what the ‘national will’ is but also the rules of the multi-party competition through it will be expressed. All ‘rival claims’ expressed by opposition parties, lawyers, journalist or minorities are demonised as conspiracies by collaborators of internal and external enemies bent on preventing the nation from expressing its will and keeping the AKP in power. That is why the AKP rhetoric has always been based on ‘national will’ rather than democracy. Indeed, there is evident parallelism between AKP’s dislike of democracy and the radical Islam’s interpretation of it as a satanic Western ploy aimed at corrupting Islam. That is also why the AKP practice has been geared towards removal of legal, administrative and civil-societal checks and balances that could prevent the government from exercising absolutist majority rule. Finally, that is also why the AKP elite has been ever eager to deploy the state power and build a large pool of loyal media outlets to ensure that the demands of the Kurds, Alevis, environmentalists, socialists and progressive professional organisations are perceived as treason committed in collaboration with ‘external enemies’. Who are those external enemies? Well, they can include anybody – Jews or Armenians, Europeans, Americans, Russians, international organisations or any combination thereof.

The process began as early as march 2004, when the then Prime-Minister, Mr Erdogan, accused the critics of police brutality against women demonstrators in Istanbul as ‘Euro informers’ – meaning collaborators with ‘enemies’ who work against Turkish interests in the European Union. It went through various stages, including wide-spread arbitrary arrests during the Ergenekon and Balyoz operations in 2007-2008 largely on the basis of fabricated evidence, the establishment of executive control on the judiciary in 2010, the excessive use of state violence against peaceful demonstrators in Gezi Park and across Turkey in 2013, the covering up of wide-spread and centrally-organised corruption in 2014, the covering up of arms and ammunition shipments to radical Islamist groups groups in Syria, and above all, the criminalisation of the Kurdish dissent and the political party fighting for a peaceful resolution of the Kurdish problem – the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP).

Elections? Yes, but only if the AKP wins!

As a result, Turkey approached the elections in June 2015 with highly compromised institutions for rule of law, voice and accountability, stability and absence of political violence, and control of corruption. When the AKP failed to win an outright majority, the failure was blamed on national and international conspiracies aimed at preventing the party and the President (who campaigned vehemently and illegally in favour of the AKP) from exercising the Turkish nation's will. To foil the conspiracy, the party establishment met under the leadership of the President in the presidential palace and resolved to ensure that the so-called coalition negotiations was nothing but an alibi for snap elections. In that meeting, it was also agreed to start military operations against the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and to demonise/criminalise the main threat against AKP rule – the People's Democratic Party (HDP) – that passed the 10-percent threshold and deprived them of their 'natural right' to exercise the national will.

Between June and 1 November 2015, the strategy was implemented with full-scale deployment of the state machinery. Having been forced to take a back seat since the Balyoz and Ergenekon trials, the military jumped on the opportunity of having a centre-stage role again in Turkey. In addition, the dormant triggers of the deep state (who had been discredited at the end of the 1990s as a result of scandals that showed the state's involvement in extrajudicial killings in the Kurdish region and elsewhere) have been put into action again in Kurdish provinces and in rallies elsewhere, with full blessing of the executive power. Finally, the security forces have turned a blind eye to terrorist acts being hatched against peaceful demonstrators, who demanded peace and expressed solidarity with the Kurds. When hundreds of civilians were killed as a result of three suicide bombs at peaceful rallies, the president and AKP officials have injected heavy doses of disinformation about the perpetrators, making sure the disinformation has been propagated massively through the loyal media.

As a result, Turkey now is a country with the worst institutional indicators among its income group. For example, a [report](#) drafted by a group of British lawyers and funded by the AKP's recent enemy, the *Gülen Movement*, concludes that the AKP government "interfered to produce 'supine' courts, censored websites, restricted freedom of expression, stifled corruption investigations and subjected detainees to degrading treatment'. In his statement to *The Guardian*, one of the authors of the report, Sir Edward Garnier, has stated that there is no 'realistic prospect of a remedy' for the victims of the Turkish government actions in the domestic courts.

Indeed, the Turkish government has played havoc with the judiciary in an effort to cover up a wide range of corruption scandals in which not only senior AKP officials and AKP-related business people but also President Erdogan and some of his family members were involved. Similar attempts at preventing investigations were made with respect to shipment of arms and ammunition to terrorist groups in Syria. Finally, there have been repeated allegations that Turkish officials were either involved or have turned a blind eye to illegal operations involving oil trade and economic/financial transactions in breach of the Iranian embargo. As a result, not only governance institutions but softer institutions such norms and values have become highly

distorted. Indeed, the AKP elite has ensured that the religious authorities formally through statements at the top level and informally through religious sermons in the mosques, have absolved the government of any wrongdoing by arguing what was done was done for the good of the nation. This was to be expected because the religious officials are on government payroll and their theological training includes the principle of *hile-i sherriye*, which implies that some deviance from the law can be justified if the purpose of the deviation is just.

The more tragic dimension of this institutional cull is the failure of Western governments (in Europe and the US) to take any action against the Turkish government – with the exception of iodine statements that expressed some ‘disquiet’ but rushed to add that Turkey is an essential strategic partner. The same criticism can be extended to international organisations such as the OECD, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which lecture poor countries about institutional quality as the main determinant of long-term economic performance but have failed to make any observation on the implications of the institutional cull for Turkey’s economic prospects.

But the sharpest criticism should be directed at the European Union – which not only delayed the publication of critical reports to suit the agenda of the AKP government but also rushed the German Chancellor to pose with the Turkish President and celebrate a ‘money for refugee control’ bargain. This is done in the face of glaring facts that Turkey’s Syria policy has been a major factor that contributed to the Syrian refugee crisis. Turkey has not only maintained a porous borders policy that enabled arm and personnel movements that exacerbated the war in Syria but also prevented effective actions against major terrorist groups such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. The criticism of the EU institutions should also include the ‘open-ended membership’ scheme, which signalled EU’s lack of commitment to anchor policy reform in Turkey and has given ammunition to AKP’s loyal media to present the European institutions as bearers of double-standards rather than democratic values.

It must be stated that the failure of Europe and the US to challenge the Turkish government occurred with full knowledge of what is going in the country. How could it be otherwise, given the extent of intelligence flows from their embassies? After all, both Merkel’s visit and the US administration’s deal with Erdogan concerning the use of *Incirlik* airbase happened after or around public statements by the [US Vice President Joe Biden](#) and the former US Ambassador to Turkey from 2005-2009, Mr [Eric S. Feldman](#), that Turkey is not a reliable partner and should not be included in high-level security meetings. It should also be noted that the escalation of violence in Kurdistan happened after the US-Turkey deal about *Incirlik* which, so far, has had no visible effect on the effectiveness of US campaign against ISIS.

Finally, the markets have also demonstrated that they are not good for institution building in emerging economies. Although we know that from the massive proliferation of Western business in repressive countries such as China, the Turkish case has a special dimension. True, the Turkish Lira lost 20% over the period of uncertainty over the last six months and the inflows of short-term capital have slowed down in the second half of 2015. However, the inflows of long-term capital continued to increase and the markets did not blink when: (i) the President intervened and prevented the Central bank from raising interest rates; and (ii) the net errors and omissions in Turkey’s balance of payments showed a sudden and unexplained inflows of \$7.8

bn in the second quarter of 2015. The Turkish case suggests that markets are not only slow to react to bad news (something we teach in introductory finance) but also biased in favour of repressive regimes.

So where do we go from here?

The received wisdom among European and US officials and mainstream commentators is that Erdogan should (or will) listen to the electorate's message that they supported the AKP because they wanted peace and stability. I think such expectations are based on wishful thinking and fall in the category of appeasement as a method of securing change in international politics. My reading of the AKP's hostility towards institutional checks and balances suggests otherwise.

The President and the AKP government will maintain their nationalistic rhetoric and militaristic approach to the resolution of the Kurdish problem. Before the elections, the party had been redesigned with the appointment of hawkish Erdogan loyalists to key positions. In addition, part of the swing vote is from supporters of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), who are even more hostile to a negotiated peace than the average AKP supporter. In addition, the AKP may well have plans to transfer some of the MHP MPs to join the pre-election transfer, Tugrul Turkes, and give the AKP government the necessary majority (330 MPs) to change the constitution via referendum. Right after the elections, a mouthpiece of the AKP elite at an arm's length, Mr Ethem Mahcupyan, has told Al-Jazeera that the AKP will resolve the Kurdish problem without involving either the PKK or the HDP. Finally, the Turkish government has recently opened fire on the positions of the People's Protection Units (YPG) of the Syrian Kurds to signal its intent to wage a full-scale attack should YPG forces attempt to move west of Euphrates. The US reaction so far has been tamed, geared towards finding a deal that would appease Mr Erdogan. Given this evidence and the extent of state terror inflicted on Kurdish towns in the run up to the elections, the AKP's Kurdish policy will remain security-based. This policy will militate against any democratic reform or institution-building alternative that will underpin a just peace and sustainable stability.

In addition, attacks on the media continues unabated. The editors of *Nokta* magazine (which has been raided several times before) have been arrested one day after the elections; and the new issue has been confiscated. Pre-election statements by AKP officials and calls in the loyal media indicate that the attacks may be extended to national newspapers, including *Cumhuriyet* (a critical paper close to the main opposition party – the Republican People's Party) and *Hurriyet* (a populist paper whose owners have been targeted by Erdogan repeatedly).

Yet, the most critical factor that militates against change is the absence of an exit strategy from the partnership-in-crime culture that has kept the AKP machine together. How can the AKP relax its hostility towards the PKK and HDP without alienating some of its MPs and party activists in provinces such as Gaziantep, Adiyaman and Urfa whose political capital consists of criminalising the HDP and the Kurds demanding autonomy? Can the AKP government

control and tame back the hatred-driven special security personnel who have risen to prominence during the recent sieges imposed on Kurdish towns? How many of these are part of the armed forces and how many belong to semi-para-military troops whose deployment was national news before the elections? How can the AKP stop using the judiciary as a trigger against political opponents without encouraging stronger calls from the opposition for proper investigations of corruption allegations, security breaches and potential international crimes along the Syrian border? How can the AKP try to reduce tensions by giving up on the most divisive yet the most cherished aim of the President – namely the establishment of a presidency with strong executive powers and little or no checks and balances?

Given these constraints, the West, the international organisations and the markets will watch, from a distance, the suffering of large sections of the Turkish society at the hands of a political clique whose obsession with unlimited power, disguised as exercising the national will, has been overlooked by Western governments and underestimated by Western media. Turkey will continue to move in and out of the norms of the Westphalian state order, with major security implications for Europe and the Middle-East. The Western governments will make critical noises publicly but will also try to secure business deals that will increasingly involve a large number of defence-related contracts. In a way, the current situation in Turkey is a magnified mirror-image of what has gone wrong in the political economy of Western regimes since the military intervention in Iraq: degeneration of democracy into a system shaped by neo-liberal dogma and capable of declaring illegitimate wars with disastrous consequences.

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