The Coming Reckoning in Turkey

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On December 24 a sixteen-year-old student named Mehmet Emin Altunses was arrested in the Turkish city of Konya. His crime? Apparently the youth insulted President Tayyip Recep Erdoğan, saying in a speech that the new president (who served two terms as prime minister between 2003 and 2014) was "the leader of corruption, bribery and theft," as well as the owner of an "illegal palace."

These were references to a corruption scandal involving high-level government officials that surfaced in December of 2013, and the recent construction of a new presidential palace in Ankara costing an estimated $615 million in taxpayer money at a time of slow growth, severe inflation, and high unemployment. Though Altunses was released on December 26 after the emergence of public outrage over the arrest, the minor still faces a four-year prison term if convicted of insulting the president under Article 299 of the Turkish criminal code.

Though coming to power on a platform of democracy and transparency in 2002, abundant evidence suggests political domination, Sunni Islam, and neoliberal capitalism form the core of the AKP's plan for the "new Turkey." An explicit nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire expressed by those in power (with Erdoğan, as premier or president, playing the role of sultan) implicitly rejects the secular principles on which the republic was founded, in favor of reactionary social and cultural policies. Perfectly compatible with this politico-cultural zeitgeist has been a profound economic transformation, in which the maintenance of high rates of speculative growth and profit outweigh all considerations of working-class health and humanity.

The case of the rebel teenager is just one in a long line of conservative and authoritarian measures taken by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) since coming to power. For youth like Altunses there is much to be critical of. Though the official encouragement of religious education in the formerly secular Turkish state dates to the years after a military coup in 1980 (that was in part an attempt to destroy the Turkish left), under the AKP the Islamicization of the public educational system has reached new heights.

Education reform in 2012 made it legal for children to attend religious or vocational schools from the age of nine, while the number of religious training schools (*Imam Hatip*) increased from 537 in 2012 to 2,074 in 2013, with almost a million students enrolled. Hundreds of secular schools have been converted into religious institutions, and students have been involuntarily assigned to state-run religious schools. In December of 2014 the National Education Council approved compulsory religious education (of the Sunni variety) in primary schools, which was quickly followed by the Education Ministry's announcement of a new "moral education" program to be administered to public schools. The working classes are especially vulnerable, seemingly by design; it is likely that eventually secular education will be the preserve of a tiny, wealthy elite.

Not one to be outdone by mere legislative reform, Erdoğan has called for further educational changes. In November the president claimed, based on a blatant misunderstanding of a document written by Christopher Columbus, that Muslim sailors reached America in 1178, three hundred years before the Spanish conquistador, and stated his intention to inform education authorities to adjust curricula accordingly. In early December a National Education Council plan was unveiled to make lessons in Ottoman Turkish (the Turkish alphabet was Latinized during Mustafa Kemal's cultural revolution from above in the 1930s) mandatory in high school. "Whether they like it or not, the Ottoman language will be learned and taught in this country," the president said of the measure.

Conservative social policies, along with Erdoğan and other party leaders' repeatedly patriarchal statements concerning women's primary social role as mothers, has unsurprisingly not improved the position of women in society. Rather, violence against women has skyrocketed since 2002, with 39 percent of women in Turkey experiencing violence at some point in their lives. In the summer of 2014 Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arinç decried "moral corruption" in Turkey, and informed women it was improper for them to smile in public. Most recently, during a visit to a hospital to celebrate the first birth in Istanbul in 2015, Health Minister Mehmet Müezzinoğlu stressed that women "have the career of motherhood," and this career should be the center of their lives. If motherhood should indeed be women's primary career, why should it matter that Turkey ranked 125 out of 142 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap report of 2014?

Another AKP casualty has been the press. According to Reporters Without Borders Turkey was the world's leader in jailing journalists in 2012 and 2013, though President Erdoğan recently stated his country had the world's "freest press" in response to European Union criticisms over the apprehension of reporters allegedly linked to the U.S.-based Islamic cleric and former Erdoğan ally, Fethullah Gülen. Though it is common knowledge that followers of Gülen suffuse positions of power and the media in Turkey, it is also clear the frequent arrest of journalists is designed to intimidate and silence opponents of the regime. A recent decision to ban media coverage of the parliamentary questioning of four former ministers allegedly involved in the corruption scandal of December 2013, and raids and arrests of media workers allegedly linked to Gülen late in 2014, are unlikely to improve Turkey's 2014 press freedom rating.

Workers have fared no better than journalists, the rights of women, or the public education system. Though reliable numbers are difficult to come by, it is probable that prior to the 1980 coup the unionization rate in Turkey stood at more than 30 percent, after two decades of working-class organization and radicalization. A new, post-coup constitution in 1982—which still governs Turkey today—severely curtailed civil liberties and labor rights. The unionization rate in Turkey as of 2011 was 5.9 percent, the lowest in the OECD. Under the AKP, between 2002 and 2011 the rate has fallen by 38 percent. The absence of left political organizations and a vibrant trade union movement has been filled by state charity and a unique form of authoritarian populism.

While the erosion of labor and union rights has corresponded to weakening purchasing power, growing inequality, and increasing insecurity for workers, the pernicious effects of contemporary capitalism were given a horrifyingly human face last year. In May of 2014 a mine explosion in the western city of Soma killed 301 coal miners; the industrial murder was the largest in the country's history. Turkey has been a historically deadly place for miners, however, even by the standards of the industry—another mining disaster five months after Soma killed 18 workers in the central Anatolian province of Karaman.

Worker deaths in the booming construction industry similarly remain endemic, with 294 killed on the job in 2013, and the number dead in 2014 was likely more. In September of 2014 the killing of 10 workers who plunged from the 32nd floor of a new luxury complex on a faulty elevator in Istanbul grotesquely epitomizes the callous disregard for human life that is structurally embedded in

precarious forms of labor like subcontracting, which now dominate many industries.

And yet, despite the authoritarianism of the state and the ravages of neoliberalism, resistance is alive in Turkey. In the summer of 2013 approximately 2.5 million Turks across the country participated in protests against the government after the brutal police suppression of an environmental protest in Gezi Park, in the heart of downtown Istanbul. Women have refused to accept the government's attempt to push them into patriarchal subordination, the most humorous example being a massive social media campaign in which women posted selfies of themselves smiling and laughing in defiance of Deputy Prime Minister Arinç's misogynist comments. Widespread worker protests erupted after the Soma massacre, and the government has finally ratified the International Labour Organization's Convention 176 on miner safety. The labor movement has also claimed important victories in the glass and tire industries over the last year, indicating trade unions remain vital organizations for the working class.

Yet nationwide societal victories have remained elusive. The AKP has remained defiant, unwilling to even countenance mistakes and evoking conspiracy theories regarding "marginal elements" whenever opposition to its policies are expressed. While Gezi Park continues to exist, activists are being prosecuted for plotting a coup during the protests, while the municipality of Istanbul plans to again consider the park's destruction. Conservative educational reforms continue, despite teacher unions' opposition; journalists are harassed and jailed, and new media laws are intended to further stifle dissent. Organized labor seems unable (as elsewhere) to formulate a serious strategy for revitalizing a radical democratic workers' movement.

The task that lies ahead for a reconstituted Turkish left is thus enormous, in large part because of the country's institutional barriers to organization and free speech. The creation of the People's Democracy Party (HDP) in 2012, a party comparable to Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, or Die Linke in Germany, suggests a leftist political alternative now exists. The government is however attempting to exclude the party from parliamentary elections in 2015, after HDP calls for support for Kobane's Kurds in Rojava (North Syria) led to widespread protests and clashes with state forces that claimed dozens of lives. Yet the formal political arena is not where real change will occur. Unless diverse social movements, from progressive trade unions to a variety of civil rights organizations, create a united front that enlists the support of historically excluded working people, the AKP's authoritarian march will continue to remold Turkish society in the interests of conservative religion and capital.

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