

## State Centered Tradition in Turkish Politics

**Abstract:** Since much has been written about the quality of democracy in Turkey recently, one can ask the question how one man and his political party managed to personalize the state with its structures and diminish the political influence of opponents within eighteen years – Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) has been created just one year before the Turkey's earthquake elections of 2002 which has started AKP's era. The 2017 constitutional referendum in Turkey made president Erdoğan the country's sole ruler with a presidential system having no check and balance mechanisms. This would not be possible without such charismatic and brilliant political leader like R.T. Erdoğan who managed to marginalize Kemalist establishment together with its elite and traditional supporters, i.e. military.

This paper basically argues that this success would not be possible without exploitation of deeply rooted state-centered tradition in Turkish politics, started just with creation of Republic in 1923, continued through twentieth century by Kemalists and their political institutions, and then transformed by R.T. Erdoğan and his conception of "New Turkey". The inhabited political institutions and particular state-centered political culture paved the way for transformation within power elite and establishment of presidential system. With a view to analyze this process

the state-centered tradition in Turkey will be analyzed together with political proceedings in AKP's era.

**Key words:** State Centered Tradition, Kemalists, R.T. Erdoğan, AKP, Elites.

## Introduction

With no doubts Turkish politics since the creation of the Republic of Turkey can be perceived as a fascinating one. The transition from the rather archaic and feudal form of state, i.e. Ottoman Empire, pushed the country towards broadly understood modernity together with unprecedented and tremendous social, political and economical changes in the 1920s marked by the creation of the Republic in 1923. The newly created state had really less in common with its predecessor together with its modern administration, state apparatus and new political elite described as Kemalists united around the creator of the Republic of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and bounded by one particular ideology, i.e. Kemalism. The most important issue in this transition process is that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his followers managed to diminish the influence of traditional Ottoman elites like Muslim clerics and sultanic administration which has been rapidly replaced by the military, Kemalist bureaucracy and new capitalist social class loyal to the state elite. The establishment of the Republic formed a political regime that, contrary to the Ottoman Empire, created strong state-centered administrative and political institutions with strong inclinations to impose particular regulations, laws and social mechanism on the society. One can say that a state has become a center of the politics in Turkey and the society has become its subject while having political, social, economical and cultural reforms imposed from the top. As Ergun Özbüdün argues "...the state is valued in its own right, is relatively autonomous from society, and plays a tutelary and paternalistic role. This paternalistic image is reflected in the popular expression *devlet baba (father state)*" (Özbüdün 2000: 128).

This paper basically argues that state centered tradition is a main feature of Turkish politics since 1923. The dominance of the state, its leaders and their supporters on the society remains a significant feature of the Turkish political culture even today, in the political entity ruled personally by the Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi). What is even more important is that this state centered tradition in Turkey paved the way for power of this political force i.e. AKP that does not share any common ideological views with the Kemalist establishment, however it uses the same power mechanisms important for the state-society relations.

## State Centered Tradition in Turkey

It is interesting to notice that state centered politics has been fully established in Turkey just in the 1920s together with the centralized unitary ideology of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. It was then when the state and its apparatus became the principal agency aimed at building a modern nation together with national economy, both so lacking in the archaic Ottoman Empire. The Kemalism was an ideology of modernization with a clear aim of carrying Turkey to that-time contemporary level of civilization. Within the framework of the republican regime Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his followers wanted to transform the society into a modern one, simply to say, close to its western counterparts. With a view to do so Kemalism was created as a guiding ideological system in the country. It needs to be underlined here that from the very beginning this ideological paradigm had two basic features. First it was the assumption that modernization should be interpreted as being identical to the West as a reference point, thus is reminiscent of Westernisation (Öniş 2004: 5). It is a paradox that broadly understood modernization in the area of politics, economy, social and cultural aspects has been linked to the state and its strength. All Kemalist principles, focused on famous six arrows, i.e. republicanism, nationalism, populism,

revolutionism, secularism and etatism, aimed at creation of national, secular state with modern economical system within this state-centered ideology and top-down attempts of reforms. From this period on the state and its elite became the only and one entity, eligible to decide about the future of social construction, political regime and economical processes in Turkey. What is more, the strong belief that religious state, like Ottoman Empire, cannot be modern (Kahraman 2002: 125–134), associated modernization with secularism and excluded huge segments of the society from the politics making processes and the state had a central institutional role. To be honest here, the Kemalist elite had an ambition to make Turkey modern with undemocratic measures acting in the name of the state and assuming a complete autonomy from other groups in the country (Özbüdün 1993: 252). The second important context of Kemalist activities is that the new regime from the very beginning had two important guardians, i.e. Turkish military and private enterprise sector dependent on the state elite in accordance with the principle of etatism. Both have been strongly associated with the bureaucratic state elite within the state-centric political entity.

The mentioned events determined Turkish politics in the twentieth century. The exclusion of the several social segments from the politics deepened socio-political cleavage, i.e. central-periphery making the state and its Kemalist elite the center and especially pro-religious oriented segments of the society, the periphery. Within the undemocratic conditions of the early Republic and 1924 Turkish Constitution, this construction was a successful tool aimed at creation of modern state, similar to the western countries. It must be underlined here that it was a time when the state became the center of all modernization processes and top-down implementation became immanent feature and a part of elites mentality which in such centralized countries often tend to be authoritarian (Linz 1975). Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his political followers are not an exception.

During the single-party Kemalist regime, with Republican Peoples Party (CHP, Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi) in power the alliance

between the military, bureaucrats and Kemalists was quite successful in modernizing the country. In such centralized state the ruling elite, on the one hand, managed to impose the reforms on the society, on the other hand, it also preserved the social cleavages since huge segments of the society have been and remained excluded from the vital political decision making processes.

The 1946 marks a tremendous change in Turkish politics and a transition to the multi-party politics. It was in the 1950 when for the first time in the history of modern Turkey the ruling Kemalist CHP has been replaced in the government by its political opponents i.e. Democratic Party (DP, *Democrat Partisi*). For ten years the Kemalist establishment remained in the political and parliamentary opposition, however maintained its informal influence on the state apparatus due to previously mentioned alliance with military especially, who perceived themselves as the guardians of the state and its principles with a secularism in the first place. The DP's rule ends with 1960 military coup d'état; the government has been overthrown and the party closed. The military junta accused DP of undermining republican values like secularism although the party did not alter the basic features of the republican regime. As the result of the coup the new constitution of Turkey has been created in 1961. The essence of this constitution clearly reveals the way how Kemalist elites or its part, i.e. military, thought about Turkey and the state in general, and also how top-down implementation of the laws and regulations was significant in that country.

The 1961 Constitution has been created under strong military pressure since civilian governments has been suspended in the 1960–1961 period. This act has two basic features. First of all, it can be considered a modern one while in theory it had established a more democratic political regime, simply to say a parliamentary model, and also expanded the catalogue of rights and freedoms of the individuals. On the other hand, the 1961 Constitution has been strongly influenced by the military who virtually placed the civilian governments and political parties under their control with two particular institutions, i.e. Constitutional Court and National

Security Council. The former was a novelty in Turkey and except of classical functions of its western counterparts was also empowered to investigate any activities perceived as dangerous for the basic principles of the state, mainly the secularism. As a consequence, the Court could decide on closure of particular political party that became a common practice in Turkey. The letter was to be composed out of the chosen civilian ministers, Chief of the General Staff and some high-ranked generals. In theory National Security Council was to advise and recommend on the national security issues, however in practice it soon appeared as a body with tremendous informal influence on civilian politics. As Tanör points out "it was a symbol of privileged position of the military bureaucracy towards civilian executive" (Tanör 1996: 304).

One can say that the 1961 Constitution was in favor of pluralistic modernity, however it strongly strengthened the power of state elite, particularly the military. As a result it created a political entity with highly fragmented structures. This pluralistic construction soon led to the fragmentation of the whole political system, resulting in further radicalization of political parties and emergence of extremist fractions from both sides of political spectrum. Contrary the military expected, the state failed to impose democratic political culture and trust, thus creating rather chaotic and divided polity.

The growth of internal anarchy, struggles of radical groups and instability of weak, often coalition governments, made the Turkish military step in again just in the 1980. Together with the second direct coup d'état the civilian government has been suspended and an army ruled Turkey in the 1980–1983 period. That time coup has had far more influence on Turkish politics than the 1960 one. Once again the state elite decided to implement and impose a new Constitution as a remedy for the political system instability. Since the detailed analysis is behind the scope of this paper, it is enough to state that the 1982 Constitution should be considered an illiberal one; its basic feature was a centralization of power by the state elite together with formal increase of military power via National Security Council. From that time on the NSC was empowered with

broad competences to influence both domestic and foreign policies of Turkey. It became a "militarized body which did not advise but rather informed the Council of Ministers about its decisions" (Bayramoğlu 2004: 84–85). During the 1980–1983 military rule the new political reality in Turkey has been created together with much less liberal regulations on civil society and rights, political parties, the media. The closure of all pre-1980 political parties, raising influence of the Constitutional Court made the Turkish Politics even more state-centered with governmental structures in which the military remained involved as the ultimate guardian of the Kemalist state and its principles. Another important issue is that the under this Constitution the President of the Republic had an active and creative role with powers far greater than usually these organs do have in a parliamentary system. Enough to say that until the twenty-first century this post was occupied by people linked to the military since the first president was Kenan Evren, the 1980 coup leader. His successors also shared an army background until 2007 when Abdullah Gül from AKP was elected.

Turkish politics in the twentieth century remains under strong influence and control of the elites which identified themselves with the state. The state-centered tradition, started together with the creation of the Republic in 1923 and dominated the nature of domestic proceedings in Turkey, while the state and its elite became the center of all crucial decisions and, as it has been showed, did not hesitate to take unprecedented measures with a view to protect its privileged position. While imposing the rules of political game the army together with the Kemalist elite monopolized the structures of the state, putting themselves in the center. The society became a subject rather on which the regulations are implemented in the highly top-down processes compromising with the elitist mentality and the overall perception of the state.

One could expect that this way of thinking about the state and its role in the politics would be transformed after 2001, together with rise of Justice and Development Party and its seizure of power in 2002. As it will be shown these expectations proved to be premature.

## AKP and the State

This section seeks to explain the dynamics of state-centered approach during the Justice and Development Party's tenure. A party that has been ruling Turkey since 2002 elections and its leader R.T. Erdoğan within eighteen years managed to marginalize political opposition and stabilize themselves in the center. What is more, since the 2017 constitutional referendum Turkey in practice does have a presidential system in which, unlike in , for instance, American system, check and balance mechanism does not exist, and the presidential power is in practice almost unlimited. With R.T. Erdoğan in office the personalization of Turkish politics is now evident. In this context it is interesting to analyze how the huge state-centered tradition in Turkish politics has been used and exploited by this politician in order to centralize his personal power.

The 2002 elections were an earthquake in Turkish politics; the AKP, established just in 2001, managed not only to win but also to create non-coalitional government, first since 1980s. At the beginning AKP functioned in a rather hostile political environment; while the party had clearly pro-Islamic background in the Kemalist establishment, still in control over state institutions, monitored its activities and made the party's leaders take rather cautious measures. Just enough to say that in the 1997 military closed down pro-Islamic Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) and made its leader, that time prime minister Necemttin Erbakan give up the power. The AKP's leadership with R.T. Erdoğan had this in their mind and at the beginning did not take any steps that could be considered incompliant with basic state values guarded by the military and Kemalist bureaucracy. Instead of that they implemented a package of reforms aimed at completing Turkey's European Union accession process that gained impetus in 1999 at the EU Helsinki Summit. With a view to fulfill the Copenhagen Criteria Turkey started to reform its legal system in such areas like economy, judiciary, civil rights and rule of law. In a country with strong authoritarian legacy and normative values identified with the state under



undemocratic 1982 Constitution this was not to be an easy task, though the elimination process was to be done by several judicial reforms adopted by the Turkish parliament since 2001. With no doubts AKP gave this process a new impetus. In 2003 the Seventh Democratization Package reduced the National Security Council's role in the political system together with subjecting its acts to the judicial review by the Constitutional Court. Later, with further reforms, the decisions of NCS lost their priority, gaining clearly advisory character. The abolition of the State Security Courts in 2004 and subjecting all public expenditures, including those of military institutions, to the civilian judicial control, were also a step towards successful civilian control of the army. During the first term in office, 2002–2007, Justice and Development Party managed to reduce the formal influence of military on civilian politics. In the following years, together with electoral successes an informal prestige of the military remained under constant attacks together with plot accusations and purges within an armed forces. All this together contributed to the diminishing of the military position within Turkish political system.

It is worth mentioning that during early years of AKP's political activity R.T. Erdoğan presented his party as a new phenomenon with broad electoral platform that differed from the traditional forces of Turkish politics. According to him the state-centered tradition should be replaced by the idea of "service", as he claimed: "The service to the people should be considered the first and the basic task of the state representatives, mainly the bureaucracy. According to us it does not mean any special privileges or immunities. Bureaucracy should not look at the people from above, it should not make the things harder. Quite the contrary, it should serve its citizens, and like in the Western countries, should contribute to the public interest" (Erdoğan 2004: 193–194). These words are an exemplification how he wanted AKP to be perceived: as a reformative force in Turkish politics. It must be underlined here that this kind of political appeal was quite successful and catchy not only for religious parts of the society, but also for all those who opposed

the state centered approach to politics represented by the Kemalist establishment.

All these factors together contributed to continuous AKP's electoral success in the consecutive parliamentary elections. What is more, the party and its leader have been supported by conservative religious urban middle class that soon became a new economic force in Turkey, loyal to AKP and a counterbalance to traditional pro-Kemalist entrepreneurs.

It is interesting to follow in Turkey a gradual process of retreat from democratic values towards undemocratic measures during AKP's era. In the relative short period R.T. Erdoğan reduced an influence of military, created a new economic background for his party and started to expand his personal control over the state apparatus with nominating his party-loyal followers for crucial posts in public administration and judiciary.

## Conclusion

The 2017 Constitutional referendum in Turkey should be perceived as a final step in the centralization processes done by the Justice and Development Party within almost twenty years. The strong state-centered tradition that can be traced back to the 1920s has been used by the dominant party as a tool. Democratizing reforms of the early 2000s contributed largely to the diminishing of the role of traditional state guardians, mainly the military. Consecutive electoral successes stabilized AKP's power and finally led to the elite replacement within still highly state oriented political culture. The "New Turkey" does have a new political elite composed of R.T. Erdoğan and his political followers, the AKP, and the dependent economic sector. Simultaneous struggle with political opposition, free media sector and several civil society associations proved the way how state-society relations are understood; once again in the history of politics in Turkey the capture of the state institutions

fruited in elitist mentality and top-down implementation mechanism became such a characteristic attitude.

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