Neoliberalism, Authoritarian Rule and Gezi Resistance in Turkey

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Introduction

The authoritarian nature of the state in Turkey, which has become more visible during Gezi Resistance, revived various discussions. Three among them are the historical roots of authoritarianism in Turkey, the so-called democratization process during the 11 years of AKP rule, and the relationship between economic development (capitalism) and democracy in general.

During the first term of the AKP rule, liberals and most left-liberals argued that Turkey was experiencing a “democratic revolution”\(^1\). Yet, towards the end of the second term of the AKP rule, the EU agenda has vanished, military has been under control and reorganization of the state institutions has been accelerated. Thus, due to these developments, some liberals have withdrawn their support from the AKP and they criticized it not only for replacing the Kemalist tutelage system with a conservative one\(^2\), but also for creating a new authoritarian regime\(^3\).

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In this paper, contrary to the liberals and left-liberals I argue that democracy and freedoms have not improved during the last 11 years. Rather, one of the fundamental features of this term is exclusion of the all social groups from economic, social and political decision-making processes except from the governing party, AKP, and big capital groups. Thus the question we need to answer is where these authoritarian and exclusionary power practices come from.

To answer this question, first, I present the basic liberal arguments about the roots of authoritarianism in Turkey, and indicate its contradictions. Second, I suggest an alternative framework that roots from the Marxist tradition by modifying N. Poulantzas’ view. Finally, I contend that Gezi Resistance should be seen as an uprising to the technocratic authoritarianism with demand of participation.

**Progressive Bourgeoisie, Democracy and Development**

Liberal and left-liberal scholars argue that the roots of the authoritarianism of Turkish state stem from the “strong-state tradition” in Turkey, inherited from the Ottoman State\(^4\). According to this argument, appointees have always had a superior position over representatives of the people since the formation of the Republic in Turkey. Thus, bureaucratic tutelage over civilian politics has continuously hindered democratic development. Liberal and left-liberal approaches also argue that excessive state intervention is not only the main cause of the permanent instability of political and economic life in Turkey, but also it prevents development of the Western type; a progressive bourgeoisie\(^5\). Therefore, according to them, only if the tutelage system had been replaced with the system of rule of law (please read this as a law which secures the property right), improvement of the democratic life and the economic development would have taken place simultaneously\(^6\). What I summarized briefly also constitutes the essence of the economic and political restructuring program of AKP government, which was supported by the IMF stability program and the EU membership process at the beginning of the 2000s.

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Contrary to this argument, I reject the assumption that bourgeoisie is an active and primary force of the democratization process both in terms of the original case (the West), and the experiences of other regions. Instead I argue that the democracy as-we-know today has developed as a result of struggles of the workers, trade unions, and other social movements but not the bourgeoisie.

To illustrate this argument, we can take the military coups in Turkey as example. According to the liberal and left-liberal approach, military interventions are one of the most important obstacles of development of a democratic society, which is certainly true. However, when we analyze military coups in Turkey, interestingly but not surprisingly, we can see that most of them have taken place to cope with the problems of capital accumulation and ironically, within every military intervention the demands of bourgeoisie constituted the economic program of the military government. Therefore, the bourgeoisie, which is shown as a primary actor of the democratization process, actually supported all the military interventions that are the biggest enemies of democracy.

In sum, we should underline that military coups prevented the development of democracy, not because they created an instable investment climate for the business class, but because they crushed social movements and trade unions, which are the true actors of the democratization process and by doing so they blocked democratic participation channels in general.

The Rising Authoritarianism and Power of Capital

If we go back to the initial question of how we can explain the rising authoritarianism, apart from the “strong state tradition” argument, I argue that Marxist tradition contains very rich sources for this debate. For instance, we can try to answer this question by employing the concept of “authoritarian statism” developed by Nicolas Poulantzas in late 1970s. I will

8 Vivek Chibber, (2013).
modify the concept and offer that “technocratic authoritarianism” may be useful for explaining the authoritarian AKP rule\textsuperscript{11}.

First, the “technocratic” part of the concept is related to the implementation of the neoliberal policies and austerity programs. Technocratic administration practices, which have become a “new normal” along with the recent economic crisis, were implemented through a) installing a new technocratic core within democratically elected government, b) forming an interim government, and c) reorganizing the state bureaucracy as a whole. Turkey experienced the first situation after 2001 economic crisis. A technocratic reform program was installed within the existing coalition government in 2001. The second case has been experienced by Italy, Greece, and Romania during the recent economic crisis. The last one has been applied by the AKP government itself. Thus, technocratic practices are not unique to AKP government. Rather, reorganization of the state and technocratic governments has become a “new normal” within Europe after economic crisis.

Furthermore, “technocratic” component of the concept indicates that crucial economic issues are located outside of the democratic policy making arena by the technicalization of the economic issues. For instance, determination of the minimum wage, monetary policy or inflation target are labeled as “technical” issues and by this way demands of trade unions or of different societal groups can easily be ignored.

Second, “authoritarian” component of the concept emphasizes the direction of the state restructuring. Distinguishing feature of the rising authoritarianism is the empowerment of the executive branch over the legislative and the juridical ones. Moreover, within the executive branch, directly prime ministry or specified economic apparatuses have become dominant over the rest of state institutions. As a result of this state restructuring process the government functions as an impermeable wall against popular demands and it blocks most participation channels of the system. However, what are secured behind this wall are the privileged fractions of big bourgeoisie, like members of TÜSİAD and their demands, and the AKP’s conservative cadre and their neoliberal conservative agenda.

From Developmentalizm to Competitiveness

Moreover, two important facets of technocratic authoritarianism need to be underlined. First is the “national competitiveness”. Developmentalism, as a dominant ideology of 1960s, has been replaced with competitiveness in the 2000s. In the era of competitiveness, social demands of working people or social movements like Gezi Resistance, which stand against commodification of the commons and which reclaim the public space, are immediately labeled as attempts heading towards destruction of the competitive power of the nation. For instance, during Turkish Airline strike or Gezi Resistance the government explicitly used this competition argument for discrediting the opposition.

Second is the excessive emphasis on stability, which constitutes also one of the biggest political capitals of the AKP. Indeed, economic and political stability are basic conditions for attracting foreign investments. If taxes on the capital and real wages are low, profit opportunities are high, and macroeconomic structure is relatively stable within a country, the “business climate” of it is described as “investable”. Moreover, stability also offers the investors the assumption that there will be no radical opposition to existing economic and political system. Thus, existence of economic and political stability conveys the information to international investors that the existing “status quo” will continue without facing any significant resistance.

Accumulation of Discontent during the AKP Rule

During the last 11 years, various groups within the society have suffered from the rising technocratic authoritarianism, which has been proactively managed by the AKP. The first group is the working class. As a part of the economic reform program of AKP, the central bank inflation targeting system, which formed the monetary framework for a low wage policy, was implemented hand in hand with a new labor regime after 2003. One of the main features of the 2003 law is the legalization of flexible, part-time work conditions and subcontracting relations. In this way, labor relations have changed according to the requirements of the new stage of capital accumulation, the necessities of international competitiveness, and the demands of the big bourgeoisie of Turkey. With this new regulation,

the working class’s potential organizational foundations were destroyed by enforcing market discipline on class members. Therefore, along with the new labor regime, not only the process of dissolution of the organized labor has accelerated, but also the possibility of formation of new working class organizations has decreased. As a result, a huge discontent has accumulated within; a) the members of working class, including white color workers/professionals, university lecturers, school teachers, who have gradually lost their job security, and b) students, as potential new members of the working class.  

The second line of the accumulation of discontent has stemmed from the conservative agenda of the AKP which is deeply bound up with neoliberalism. First of all, AKP’s new population policy, which depends on the encouragement of the birth rates by suggesting women to have at least three children against the possible threat of aging population in the medium term. This may result in a decrease in the competitive industrial power of Turkey because of the possible wage increases. As a part of this new population policy, the AKP has also attempted to put a ban on abortion. Thus, AKP’s neoliberal conservative policies, which aim to control the women body, had encountered a strong response from women in general and especially feminist movements in the recent years.

Third, AKP’s aggressive urban gentrification policies and large scale redevelopment plans, which aim to accelerate the construction sector, and thus, economic growth, and commodification of urban space, have created enormous frustration among eco-activists, architect unions, artists and local communities. Moreover, the government’s nuclear power plant and hydroelectric dam projects have also faced a large peasant resistance. Thus we can safely argue that the environment and urbanization policies of the AKP, which bases on the commodification of the nature and common places, have been one of the most important channels of accumulation of discontent.

Fourth, Alevi have increasingly felt that the AKP government ignores their demands although the government’s “Alevi opening” processes. Especially along with the Syrian policy of the AKP, Alevi have often expressed their discontent during the last years. Fifth,
the AKP’s new regulation of alcoholic drinks, which limits to usage of them, triggered a secular reaction and many people feel that their life style is in danger. Sixth, Prime Minister Erdoğan’s mode of speech, behavior, and government create a frustration especially among youth.

Finally, an increasing number of imprisonments, long and unfair trial processes, long detention periods, legal problems, and more crucially the perception that legislative branch has lost its independent status after legislative reform of the AKP, have created a huge reaction that comes from various social groups like journalists, students, socialists, trade unionists, Kurds, and Kemalists.

Gezi Resistance: an Uprising against the Technocratic Authoritarianism

In a nutshell, I focused on two main points so far. First, I argued that Gezi Resistance has undermined the justification of the liberal argument, which claims that economic development and democratization are parallel processes and I addressed the limits of neoliberal conservatism in Turkey. Second, I offered an alternative framework on the roots of the rising authoritarianism in AKP’s term. Third, I briefly summarized various channels of accumulation of discontent during the AKP’s rule. Finally, I will assess briefly the Gezi Resistance based on the framework I offered so far.

The Gezi Resistance can be described as a sum of opponents against exclusionary government practices. Perhaps, among others, one of the most important demands of the resistance was participation. Participation is a key concept because it stands at the intersection point of all civil rights. With the Gezi Resistance, the people, who experienced exclusionary government practices as a result of the rising technocratic authoritarianism during the AKP term, showed that they want active participation to the democratic processes even if it may come at the expense of their lives. In this sense, Gezi Resistance should be seen also as an uprising against the technocratic authoritarianism. However, every uprising does not result in a comprehensive restructuring of economic and political life. For this reason, persistent struggles are necessary for first stopping the technocratic authoritarianism, and then, for reaching a true democracy which would go beyond the liberal one. As streets of Turkey emphasize: “this is just the beginning”.