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Turkey's civilian-military complex

The plight of conscientious objectors in the country shows that the country has not eclipsed its military past.

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Turkish society's complex relationship with the military has recently featured in the news, this time offering hope that civil authority had triumphed over the army's shadowy hold on political life. First came the news of the detention of Turkey's former Chief of General Staff Ilker Basbug under the charge of heading a terror organisation and conspiring to bring down the Turkish government. And shortly afterwards came the sensational indictment against the surviving architects of Turkey's bloody 1980 coup, former president and Chief of General Staff General Kenan Evren and the former air force commander, Tahsin Sahinkaya.

For many, this suggested an overcoming of the democratic deficit in civilian-military relations in Turkey. Was Turkey, promoted as an exemplary model of secular democracy, being stimulated by the revolutionary energies of the Arab Spring, finally settling its accounts with its culture of pedagogic militarism?

It would be wise to curb such enthusiasm.

It is true that the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF), which has in the past brought about the downfall of four civilian governments through the bloody coups of 1960 and 1980, and the indirect interventions of 1971 and 1997, does not hold its past power and autonomy.

Two parallel cases of investigation, "Ergenekon" and "Sledgehammer", launched after the discovery of grenades in the house of a retired officer in June 2007, have turned into a major legal and political controversy that have seriously damaged the TAF's hegemony and reputation. More than 195 retired and active duty officers have been charged with engaging in a clandestine plot to bring down Turkey's moderately Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP). The alleged charges include the staging of terrorist actions, including the bombing of a mosque and other politically motivated assassinations with the hope of creating a country-wide atmosphere of chaos and disintegration.

Considering itself as the guardian of the Turkish republic and the republic's founding principles, secularism and national unity, TAF justifies its intervention in civilian politics with the lofty aim of restoring order and re-implementing the Kemalist principles of the regime. While there is considerable controversy over the nature of the evidence associated with both investigations, the tumultuous legal process resulted in a considerable decline in TAF's credibility and prestige.

But the restriction of the TAF's autonomy and the chance of further intervention in political life do not amount to a full-scale "civilianisation" of Turkey's democracy. Uncritically celebratory accounts of the civilian government's triumph over the military ignore the increasingly authoritarian tendencies of the AKP government; they work to shift attention from the continuing crackdown on pro-Kurdish democratic activism in Turkey and detract from the escalation of the arbitrary detention of activists, journalists, publishers and academics critical of the government under the guise of "fighting terrorism".

And perhaps more poignantly, it underestimates the ways in which militarism continues to pervade socio-political life and cultural attitudes in Turkey, as well as the continuing struggle of those who challenge this.

The case of the conscientious objector

On November 27, 2011, roughly a month before Basbug's arrest, a young man aged 28, Muhammed Serdar Delice, was taken into custody during a random identity check in Istanbul, and arrested two days later. Delice is a conscientious objector (CO) who declared his objection five months into his military service, which has been compulsory in Turkey since 1927.

Among the 47 members of the Council of Europe, only Turkey, along with Azerbaijan, refuses to recognise conscientious objection, defined by both the United Nations and European Convention on Human Rights as a legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief. Turkey imprisons COs for "insubordination" and "desertion".

Moreover, COs are often persecuted for the declaration of their conscientious objection to the public. A public declaration of the personal motivations for refusing, it is argued, "alienates the people from military service", a sacred institution of Turkish nationalism. According to Article 318 of the Turkish Penal Code, alienating the public from military service is a crime, punishable by up to three years of imprisonment.

In addition to COs themselves, journalists and activists who have published CO declarations, or written articles and op-eds in support of the COs have been charged with this curious crime. In 2006, objections to military service and criticism of the military were added to the Anti-Terror Law, in line with the global tendency towards the narrowing of civil liberties in the name of national security after 9/11.

For his insistence on the CO status, Muhammed Serdar Delice is now charged for desertion, insubordination and alienating the people from military service. He was tried for the first of these crimes, desertion, on January 20, 2012, and the court ruled that his imprisonment should continue.

This adds Delice's name to the long list of COs, including Osman Murat Ulke, Halil Savda, Mehmet Bal, Mehmet Tarhan, Enver Aydemir and Inan Suver, who have been imprisoned under similar charges multiple times, and often reportedly subjected to torture during the period of their detention. Delice is currently being kept in the Gulhane Military Medical Academy, possibly to be subjected to psychiatric testing in order to determine whether his insistence on the CO status is a form of "antisocial personality disorder", which would render him "unfit" to serve.

As a result of these tests, Delice may be issued a medical report exempting him from service as has been the case for some other COs, including Halil Savda, Mehmet Bal and Enver Aydemir. Aimed at the silencing of COs' oppositional voices, these "medical" reports attempt to undermine the significance of their anti-militarist message in a society that defines itself as a "military nation", and considers military service as a rite of passage to "manhood" and "full citizenship".

Islamic objections

Delice's challenge to the pervasive militarism that shapes the political discourse and socio-cultural norms in Turkey is an important call for civil rights. But perhaps, more significant are his particular motivations for objection in a society experiencing a form of moderate Islamic revivalism in the last two decades.

While Turkey's COs have been predominantly anarchists, Delice, along with Enver Aydemir before him, grounds his refusal to serve on his Islamic beliefs. It is because he is a Muslim, he says, that he refuses to kill and die for the Turkish Army. And this is a particularly challenging position to take in a culture that considers military service as a religious duty.

Modern Turks refer to the Turkish Army as *Peygamber Ocagi* ["the house of Mohamed"]. While the generic name used to define conscripts is *Mehmetcik* ["the followers of Mohamed" or "little Mohamed"], soldiers who lose their lives during service are revered as *shaheeds/sehit* ["martyrs"], and those who return injured from combat as *ghazi/gazi* [a Muslim soldier fighting the infidel]. In basing his opposition to military service on his Islamic faith, Delice threatens the army's pragmatic use of religion to underpin its legitimacy and authority.

Delice also presents a problem for the ruling AK Party's attempts to forge a new Turkish national self-confidence tinged with an Islamic identity. When it first came to power, AKP promised

pious Muslims, especially women, the expansion of conscientious and religious freedoms, and full equality in access to education, office, etc. These promises have not fully materialised.

With the recent Union of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK) operations, targeting pro-Kurdish activists, publishers and academics on the basis of alleged support for the outlawed KCK, the current government has also shown that it is as intolerant of opposition and free speech as the governments it has preceded. Now Turkey's COs, including the Muslim ones, are forcing AKP to show whether there is any meat to its rhetorical commitment to civilian democracy, as well as to conscientious and religious freedoms.

So far, this has not been the case, as the detention of the COs continues. Indeed, Prime Minister Erdogan has recently defied the pressure from the European Court of Human Rights to legalise conscientious objection, by arguing that the Turkish military is indeed "the house of Mohamed". Turkey's Muslim COs beg to differ.

Disrespectful interference

I first met Muhammed Serdar Delice on a hot Ramadan evening in Istanbul last summer. I wanted to interview him for my research on Turkey's emergent Islamist COs and anti-militarist activists.

Once he broke his fast, we sat down for many cups of Turkish tea and a long conversation about his religiosity and refusal to serve. What particularly led him to leave the barracks and declare conscientious objection despite his nationalist views, he insisted, was the disrespectful interference with his religious practice in the army, "the house of Mohamed".

Moreover, Delice was profoundly upset by the indoctrination in the barracks about Turkey's three-decade-old war with the Kurdish insurgents in the southeast region of the country. Criticising the use of Islamic motifs of martyrdom in reference to the war, Delice asked: "How come they can talk about martyrdom while killing the Kurds in this country? It is forbidden to shed blood, especially of other Muslims, in Islam. One does not become a martyr killing and dying like this."

The right to conscientious objection, and especially the refusal of pious Muslims, such as Delice, to partake in the ongoing war, has the potential to become a litmus test for the AKP government's commitment to civilian democracy and conscientious freedom, and its willingness to challenge the military not merely as a political foe, but as a cultural force.

The woeful gap between the international image of a civilian and progressive "Muslim democracy" crafted for Turkey, and its anti-democratic handling of opposition and the demands for COs' rights at home, suggests that it may have some distance to go before it can escape the hold of militarism over society and state.