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Turkey and the Purification of Dictatorships

By Omur Sahin Keyif
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Istanbul.

Turkey will have an election tomorrow. Its ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), has been busy destroying all its opponents – even those who had allied with it since 2001. After its election victories in 2002 and 2007, AKP started a ‘cleaning operations’ that has targeted its opponents. Liberals stood by as the government purified the political field.

AKP, led by President Erdogan, had collaborated with their fellow Islamists, the powerful Gulen Movement, whose tentacles go through the police and judiciary. Now, even the Gulen Movement is the enemy. All of this is sold to the people by the government and pro-government media as normal practices of democracy.

Outlets such as Star and Merkez are totally enamored by the government’s project. Star TV is now owned by Dogan Media, while Star Daily was sold to the former president of the Turkish Football Federation Hasan Doğan and a Cypriot businessman Ali Özmen Safa. In 2008, Star Daily

was sold again to a close ally of Erdogan, Ethem Sancak. In 2007, all the Merkez Media outlets (Sabah, Takvim, Yeni Asır, Fotomac, ATV, ATV Europe and Izmir TV) were sold to Ahmet Calik, owner of the Turkuaz Media Group, a state affiliated Saving Deposit Insurance Fund (TMSF). The AKP government honored Ahmet Calik with the Order of Merit of Turkish Republic in 1999, the Order of Merit of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkish Republic in 2002 and the Order of Merit of Turkish Grand National Assembly in 2006.

The media became, essentially, pro-government. Praise for Erdogan was the standard news. But, Erdogan was not satisfied. He wanted more. Two months before the 2011 elections, Dogan Media ran into trouble from the tax man. It had to sell its flagship – Milliyet – and a smaller paper – Vatan – to Demiroren Holdings. The owner of Demiroren – it turns out – is the current president of the Turkish Football Federation. Star TV also changed hands, now firmly with the pro-Erdogan Dogus Group.

Independent media meanwhile faced the axe. In 2011, nearly 110 journalists were to jail, many of them of Kurdish origin.

Gulen's Movement also took it on the chin then and now. On October 26, 2015, the pro-Gulen media house, Koza Ipek Holding, was placed under trusteeship, that includes the Turkuvaz Media Group. The decision was taken by the Ankara Second High Criminal Court, who argued that Ipek was “giving financial support to the Fetullahist Terrorist Organisation (FETÖ) and was conducting propaganda.” Gulen, a former close ally of Erdogan, is now – ironically – asking for justice.

A deputy of the opposition party – HDP – Ertugrul Kurkcu takes a broad perspective on these matters. “All these operations against the media are the reflections of installation of a new structure that never differentiates between state and party. In other words we have a party-state. Indeed, Erdogan attempts to produce the basis for a party-state or a dictatorship. These are not only the continuations of an oppressive state, but the signs of the installation of a new state.”

On the day that the government went after the Ipek group, AKP deputy and former advisor and speechwriter for Erdogan, Aydin Unal came on television. On a pro-government channel, he conceded, “There is a lot of pressure on Turkey. If we say something, the world accuses us of interfering with the press. So we're not in a comfortable position now, but after the November 1 election, we will settle up with Hurriyet, Sozcu, Cumhuriyet,” the three major non-Erdogan media houses.

As a matter of fact, these media organisations already face the pressure of AKP. At the eve of Sunday's parliamentary elections, pressure on critical media outlets has increased. Cumhuriyet daily faces courts cases and physical attacks. They are also targeted by ISIS. Two suicide bombers, captured in Gaziantep, had the address of the Cumhuriyet office in their pocket. Police stepped up security measures at and around the headquarters of the Cumhuriyet daily. Cumhuriyet reporter Canan Coskun, is facing a twenty-three year jail sentence because of one report. Coskun says, “The danger is not only for Cumhuriyet. None of the reporters or media outlets is free and safe anymore. We have already buried freedom of expression and press freedom.”

Ibrahim Varli, the editor of the independent daily paper, *BirGun*, faces several defamation suits against Erdogan and his family. He says, “Today all opponent media outlets feel that they are working under risk of operation by government. All these happenings are the impact of AKP tyranny.”

All policies, declarations and future plans of the government show us that the “new state” will be more authoritarian and more oppressive. Erdogan aspires to control not only the government, but also the state. He wants the president to have carte blanche for action. He would like to have political immunity. He does not want any scrutiny. What he wants is more power.

In Rize, Erdogan’s hometown, he said on August 14, “The president acts abiding by the restrictions of authority as demarcated in the Constitution, but he also performs his obligations from a position of direct responsibility to the public. What we need now is to resolve this de facto situation with a new legal charter.” But Erdogan could not resolve the problem. In the June election, AKP did not win a majority. Forty-five days of useless negotiations did not result in a government. That is why Turkey goes back to the polls tomorrow.

Ilhan Cinhaner of the opposition CHP says that the AKP will not win the election. On the contrary, it will suffer a historical defeat. The main factor will be the silent voters who used to vote for the AKP but will no longer do so.

On October 29, Turkey’s Republic Day, Erdogan stood at his palace’s balcony to wave to the people. Nine hundred feet divided him from the crowd. He will not come closer to the people, nor will they come close to him. It is this distance that will unseat him from power.