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Turkey and the Age of Defeat

By Tariq Ali
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Zaman: Three years from now we will be reaching 50th anniversary of “May 68 Revolution”... What are the two things in the world that have changed/have not changed in the world after a half century?

Tariq Ali: The world has been turned upside down. Capitalism....despite the 2008 crash—has been triumphant in most parts of the world. Resistance has not ceased but its forms are very different to those of the last century. What is worth noting that even the most radical resistance to empire and capital—the Bolivarian governments in South America—did not envisage a break with capitalism. In Western Europe the crisis of 2008 created new openings and enabled new political forces to come onstage, on the left or the right, or cross-cutting both. The most spectacular case of such a force catapulting into government is, of course, Syriza in Greece, which combined the most drastic experience of economic crisis, manifest responsibility of local social-democracy for plunging the country into it, and an electoral system greatly exaggerating the actual strength of the party. At the other extreme, Germany suffered least from the crisis, and with a pre-existing party canalizing opinion to the left of the SPD, saw scarcely any organized post-crisis politics of significance, despite the relative ease of crossing the electoral threshold. In Britain and Spain, where establishment social-democracy was tarred with its role in precipitating the crisis, in one case the electoral system diverted radical backlash into the Labour Party itself, as too into the Democratic Party in the US, in the other – where the crisis was much more severe – it permitted the emergence of Podemos as an independent force. In both countries, the national question threatens the unity of the state (upheld by Corbyn and Iglesias alike) producing in Scotland far the most successful of all post-crisis forces in the West: 50 per cent of the vote on a

71% turn-out, compared with 35 per cent on a 56% turn-out for Syriza in Greece. As for Turkey, we watch in horror.

In the Middle-East there is no progressive force with the marginal exception of the Syrian Kurdish part. Clerics of various sorts determine the actions of moderate and radical wings of Islam. We are living in a period of defeat.

Zaman: In your commentary in Sabah Daily many years ago, you stated that AKP would not be able to solve real problems such as the Kurdish issue. On what grounds did you reach to this prediction, which has been proven correct as seen by recent events in Turkey? What do you think about AKP's many undemocratic moves in recent years, contrary to the democratic values they claimed in the beginning? Why has the AKP changed so much? What are the most serious dangers awaiting Turkey?

Tariq Ali: Unlike some Turkish intellectuals, who were once on the left, I was never taken in by Erdogan. From the very beginning it was obvious that he was a clever opportunist (to put it at its mildest) leading an Islamist petty-bourgeois party and I was convinced it would end badly. The only alternative he represented was to the preceding regimes, heavily dependent on the Army. So AKP posed as the avatars of a new democracy, but the fact that the AKP used to be (before the defection of Gulen's gang) NATO's favourite Islamists speaks for itself.

The concessions offered to the Kurdish parties were designed to end the PKK's armed insurrection. Nothing more. Sometimes, you know, it's easier to understand a political landscape if you're not part of it. Though I must stress that 99 percent of my Turkish friends had no illusions in Erdogan. None. As for your other questions the AKP has become a normal governing party in abnormal conditions. The Gulen split, the large-scale corruption in which Erdogan and other AKP leaders are themselves involved, the use of violence during the nationwide mass protests sparked off by the Gezi occupation, the decision to back ISIS and topple the Assad regime, the most recent events in Ankara, linked undoubtedly to the rise of ISIS inside Turkey itself (why did the AKP not foresee this given the history of radical Islamist violence inside the country). And, of course, the AKP reacted badly to not winning a majority thanks to the startling rise of the HDP and the attempt to create an integrated party of the Turkish Left. The blood spilt in Ankara was a direct assault on these new political forces. The AKP's hegemony was breached first by an internal split, later by mass uprising and finally by a democratic election. Erdogan's Syrian policy, backed by NATO, has destabilised the country. The ISIS cancer is spreading. They will not stop of their own accord. Pakistanisation beckons.

Zaman: There is ongoing speculation of map changes in the Middle East. What kind of Middle East will you envisage 10 years time?

Tariq Ali: We are witnessing a tragedy. The Middle-East created by the British and the French after the First World War (thanks partially to the short-sighted decision by the Ottoman bureaucracy to back Germany rather than remain neutral) is now being destroyed and re-created by the American Empire with the help of its local satraps: Israel and Saudi Arabia. The occupation of Iraq and the open support to clerical Shia parties created a serious rift between the two large Muslim communities in that country which is being exacerbated in Syria, Yemen,

Bahrein, etc. Its a disaster. It seems that the US does not want any sovereign state to exist in the region. The model is to create replicas of the Gulf states elsewhere in the region.

Zaman: When was your most recent trip to Istanbul and how do you compare old and new Istanbul?

Tariq Ali: I have visited Istanbul many times over the last decades. I was there soon after the Gezi events and have, in the past, spoken at events in Ankara, Diyarbakir, Izmir and Istanbul. I was last there in 2013. An old cinema on İstiklal was about to be dynamited. It would be replaced by yet more characterless shops that have already disfigured this historic street with its arcades and Belle Epoque apartments (where, once upon a time, many wealthy Armenian merchant families lived). There had been a few mild demonstrations against the execution of the movie house, but symbolic in character. A new bridge over the Bosphorus was another threat a new grand mosque to steal the landscape from Sinan's delicate architecture. These were ravings of a cynical reptile now losing touch with reality, a megalomaniac obsessed with leaving his mark on a city like the Ottoman Sultans. This also had another advantage. More money for the AKP's favoured building industry, a healthy of proportion of which would end up in the pockets of the AKP leaders.

Postscript

The Turkish elections represent a modest victory for the New Right in Turkey. The carefully orchestrated violence has sent some Turkish voters scurrying back to Erdogan and giving him an overall majority, but not one large enough to change the constitution. Its a reversion to the status quo ante. The Republican secularists have failed miserably. The progressive HDP has declined but still has significant seats in parliament. This battle has been lost, but the war is not over. The violence in Ankara frightened many people, but Erdogan's cultivation of ISIS suggests that the destabilisation of the country is going to continue. We must neither laugh nor cry but understand.