A Sultanate of Kitsch: The Gezi Park Protests, Islamic Revival and Ottoman Nostalgia

The world is now taking notice of Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (or AKP) and its policies towards neighbouring Syria and Iraq, as well as its attempt to wrestle with its northern neighbour, Russia. But, the AKP's internal aims and goals also warrant wider interest, and in this context, the now largely forgotten Gezi Park protests provide a salutary lesson for critics of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Ahmed Davutoğlu.

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been in the news lately as a result of the Turkish downing of a Russian fighter jet and the killing of one of the two pilots. Russian President Vladimir Putin subsequently accused Erdoğan and his circle of entertaining lively trade links with ISIS (aka the Islamic State or IS), allowing the Caliph to capitalize on his stolen oil via Turkey and its energy connections. Putin also accused Tayyip Erdoğan of pursuing a "deliberate policy of supporting the 'Islamization'" of his own country. Domestically, many critics of the AKP government have for years been charging Erdoğan and his acolytes of attempting to turn Turkey's political system into a theocratic autocracy, oftentimes warning that Turkey would become another Iran. In general, such voices do not receive a lot of international attention. Still, now more than two years ago the world-at-large suddenly took notice of Turkey's internal developments as a result of the so-called Gezi Park protests. In 2013, these popular protests rudely awakened Turkey's somewhat self-righteous ruling AKP and the subsequent proliferation of popular demonstrations throughout the nation and their international spread across numerous television set worldwide ensured that the proposed destruction of the small park was halted, constituting a first popular victory over the figure of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan . . .

Ruling the Land, Re-Vitalizing the Economy

The party founded by the current popularly elected President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been running Turkey ever since its members gained a 34 percent share of the vote in the November 2002 elections. Their popularity grew and grew in the coming years and their seemingly adept handling of the economy ensured that certain sections of the population prospered enormously and that the country as a whole acquired a favourable reputation across the region and around the globe. Turkey's economic boom was, however, primarily underwritten by a severe programme of privatization, revenue-maximizing privatization (as if any other form of privatization exists). And fairly recently, Chatham House's Turkey expert Fadi Hakura opined that the AKP boom has “pretty much come to an end. Turkey has now entered a prolonged period of economic stagnation”.

Still, the AKP's grassroots supporters, who have been largely bypassed by the AKP-led economic boom, continue to express their deep trust in Tayyip Erdoğan and his cohorts, primarily the current PM Ahmed Davutoğlu and his cabinet. This trust is not necessarily based on the country’s economic performance under AKP tutelage, but rather on the perception that Erdoğan, Davutoğlu, and the whole AKP machinery is now finally ushering in a glorious return to the country's roots — Islam as contained in the genealogical tree of Osman, meaning the Ottoman Empire and its position at the zenith of the Islamic world (1299-1922). In spite of the drastic reforms carried out in the first decades of the Republic’s existence — reforms supposedly aimed at Westernization, Secularization, and Progress — the wide bulk of Turkey's population nevertheless remained deeply pious and beholden to the precepts of the Prophet, as
promulgated by the Directorate of Religious Affairs (a government branch set up in the aftermath of the caliphate’s 1924 abolition and the concomitant dissolution of the office of the Sheikh-ul-Islam). These wide swaths of pious and compliant Turks now feel that the AKP is finally offering them a chance to live life as true Muslims. These Turkish citizens see the AKP as a force for good, turning back excessively permissive behaviours and attitudes (usually referred to as ‘secularist’ or laik in Turkey). And, the fact that the AKP-led governments have indeed sought to instill a greater sense of Islamic identity amongst the country’s population remains beyond doubt. At the same time, Erdoğan’s party has also recently managed to alter the educational system in such a way as to ensure that coming generations of Turks will be more pious after having finished their mandatory time on school benches.

As a result, it should come as no surprise that it has been mostly plain sailing for Turkey’s AKP-led governments over the past years. Nevertheless, not all citizens of Turkey subscribe to this government-driven movement towards a greater visibility for Islam in public life. For example, public opinion surveys conducted on behalf of the European Commission and known as Eurobarometer seem to indicate that in 2013 about 4.5 million Turks self-identified as atheists (ranging from agnostics to a-religious). Two years later, Eurobarometer conducted research indicating that the numbers of Turks with no religious affiliation or self-identification has risen to 5.5 million. Ever since he emerged on Istanbul’s political scene in the early 1990s, Tayyip Erdoğan has been a divisive figure, attracting a large measure of adulation but also quite a bit of disgust from the public-at-large. Still, the first major shock for Erdoğan and his AKP only came more than two years ago. PEN International’s Alev Yaman recalls that “[b]ulldozers began work on the Gezi Park site at approximately 23:30 on 27 May 2013. A call to action was issued on Twitter at 23:47. A group of 20 environmentalists responded, travelling immediately to Gezi Park, halting the demolition work and taking the decision to initiate a sit-in until the bulldozers left the park”.

The Gezi Park Protests: A Pyrrhic Victory

The demolition work at the Gezi Park site was part of the so-called Taksim Pedestrianization Project, a gentrification exercise aimed at transforming the area between the districts of Harbiye and Tünel into a pedestrian-only zone, or more realistically speaking into a giant open-air shopping mall. The scheme began with the construction of a tunnel connecting Cumhuriyet Caddesi and Tarlabası Bulvari, which is currently in use. Eventually, there are supposed to be five tunnels, one for each approach to the Taksim Square, with the obvious exception of the pedestrianized İstiklal Caddesi – arguably the heart of the open-air shopping mall aimed at by the project. It seems more than just ironic that the “project is being criticized by architects, urbanists, and activists on grounds that it will block easy pedestrian access to the square once finished”. In addition the Gezi Park, which occupies the area north of the spot which till recently functioned as a bus station, was supposed to be replaced by a replica of the 19th-century Topçu Barracks, with a shopping mall at its heart. The original barracks were torn down by the Istanbul authorities in 1940. The initial protests to save the local trees and greenery soon spread nationwide and were met with fierce and excessive police resistance. These Gezi protests functioned as lightning rod attracting those opposed to the direction taken by Tayyip Erdoğan and the AKP-led government. Alev Yaman explains that eight people died and “8,16312 [were] injured over the course of the protests reflect[ing] the fierce intensity of clashes between police and protesters as the demonstrations spread across Turkey: 5,300 individuals were arrested and 160 were kept in long-term detention,13 with many arbitrarily detained without charge for hours on end. By 30 September, 153 journalists had been attacked and 39 taken into police custody”. The Gezi protests shook the AKP and its grassroots supporters to the core.

Following the violent protests and the very public displays of dissatisfaction, the Taksim Pedestrianization “project was rejected by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism’s Protection Board in January 2014 on the grounds that it was not in the public benefit”, as reported in the Turkish press. Following this general dismissal, Istanbul’s First Administrative Court annulled the project as a whole on 29 April 2014. Since then the whole Taksim area has been in a dismal state, having become a veritable cemented walkabout area, as if the powers-that-be were expecting other indignities. And last summer, the news finally arrived that the Council of State (known in Turkish as Danıştay) has now apparently opened the way for the construction of a replica of the Topçu Barracks on the site occupied by the green space that is Gezi Park.

Nostalgia for Ottoman Islam: A Sultanate of Kitsch
As such, the Turkish authorities revel in the construction of replicas and other fake structures. For example, President Erdoğan had a “working office” constructed in the vicinity of a small residence originally built for the last reigning sultan of the Ottoman Empire, the self-proclaimed leader of the Islamic world between the 16th and 20th centuries . . . To be precise, Sultan Mehmet Vahdettin VI’s kiosk on the Bosphorus was torn down and rebuilt as a near-exact replica of the original, an engineering exercise commonly referred to as restoration in Turkey. In the same vein, Turkey’s Council of State seems to be insinuating that the construction of a new building resembling a no-longer extant barracks constitutes an act of restoring the nation’s cultural heritage.

I would argue that the Council of State’s decision regarding the Taksim Pedestrianization Project really constitutes a potentially dangerous form of misguided nostalgia for propaganda purposes. The decision appears to placate a longing for an Ottoman past that has become a paragon of Islamic virtue and power in the perception of large swathes of Turkey’s population. At the end of this year’s fasting period last July, the current Prime Minister, the wily Ahmet Davutoğlu was heard issuing equally pseudo-romantic and nostalgic language: “God willing, we will bring the order and justice of the Ottomans to today and into tomorrow”. In this context, rumours have now also started abounding again about the construction of a mosque in the Taksim area, as a kind of counterweight to the Orthodox Aya Triada Church. Talk of a Taksim Mosque goes back to the previous century when Tayyip Erdoğan was Mayor of Istanbul and Necmettin Erbakan’s Islamist Refah Partisi (RP, erroneously translated as Welfare Party) was part and parcel of Turkey’s political landscape. In the late 1990s, these rumours eventually dissipated, but now in the 21st century, President Erdoğan might very well be on the verge of leaving his permanent mark on the city of Istanbul and its unofficial heart, the wider Taksim and Beyoğlu areas . . . In fact, this government-led drive towards an Ottoman revival (as a shorthand for an Islamic Réveil) leads to a proliferation of architectural replicas, reproductions, copies, and other mass-produced items of oftentimes saccharine nostalgia and as a result, it seems that the AKP is now really attempting to build its own real estate Sultanate of Kitsch to accommodate its policy of spreading Islam at home (and abroad).

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