Insulting the Prez: Tayyip Erdoğan, Satire and Islamophobia

At the outset of the 21st century, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan created a new political project in Turkey, namely the Justice and Development Party (or AKP) that set out as defining itself as a Muslim-Democrat entity similar to the many Christian-Democrat parties active in Western Europe. Erdoğan's party has now led Turkey for many years and succeeded in transforming Anatolia and Western Thrace into a hitherto unknown country: namely into the “New Turkey,” a place where freedom of the press and freedom of expression are becoming more and more tenuous concepts, and the religion of Islam is once again an important part of the political discourse and public life.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been a divisive figure ever since he set foot on the public stage in 1994. The outcome of that year's local elections in Turkey shocked the nation and put the fear of God in many a citizen's heart. For, at long last, the Islamist politician Necmettin Erbakan (1926-2011) and his Refah Partisi (or RP. erroneously translated as Welfare Party) succeeded in conquering the country, local council by local council. And the mayoral seat of the metropolitan municipality of Istanbul went to Tayyip Erdoğan in a decisive electoral victory achieved by means of procuring 25.19% of the popular vote. Never shy of controversy, Erdoğan immediately set out to broadcast disturbing message after disturbing message. As a result, after assuming his mayoral duties at the end of March, certain members of the public and particularly left-leaning and self-proclaimed secularist intellectuals started attacking Erdoğan's figure on a near-continual basis. And, more often than not, the Mayor responded in kind. A very telling instance occurred on 22 November 1994. The well-known journalist and broadcaster Hulki Cevizoğlu was talking to his studio guest, the popular writer and humorist Aziz Nesin (1915-95) about the latter's remarks concerning Istanbul's Mayor and his public attachment to the religion of Islam and the Shariah, at the time still a topic anathema to large swathes of the public-at-large as the Kemalist system was still in place safeguarded by the country's Armed Forces and ostensibly set in stone by the nation's Constitution (1982). And at that point, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan joined the conversation via telephone. Starting off by casting aspersions on Aziz Nesin's status as an intellectual, the Mayor then proceeded to quote the 1985 edition the Turkish translation of the Grand Larousse encyclopédique, one of the great standard works of reference in the pre-internet age. Specifically, Erdoğan recited a passage from volume II, page 762 dealing with Islam and explaining that the religion can be defined as consisting of the Shariah: “Who is a Muslim? Somebody who believes in the religion of Islam. Given that I proclaim, alḥamdulillāh [or praise be to God or Allah], I am a Muslim, according to this [just-quoted] description [or definition] I [also] have the right to proclaim, alḥamdulillāh, I am a proponent of the Shariah.”

Turks are Muslims

Tayyip Erdoğan's televised 1994 telephone intervention demonstrated in living colour that he would be a politician quite unlike any of his predecessors in Turkey. Though his political and spiritual mentor Erbakan had been advocating an Islamic réveil since 1969, no Turkish politician had previously dared to public confess his (or her) allegiance to the Prophet's cause in such stark and honest fashion: “alḥamdulillāh, I am a Muslim . . . alḥamdulillāh, I am a proponent of the Shariah.” Though the self-proclaimed secularist élite and urban classes recoiled in disgust upon hearing these words, these words undoubtedly struck a chord with large swathes of pious Anatolian Turks. After all, the Turks had founded the Ottoman Empire in the late 13th century that became the last bastion of Islam in a world increasingly dominated by the Christian West and its colonial ambitions in the early modern and more recent periods. The Ottomans as a political entity claimed primacy in the world of Islam as the most powerful state able to
hold the Caliphate as the spiritual leaders of Sunni Muslims worldwide. As a result, it seems all but natural that the Turks as a nation would equally feel deeply attached to the Prophet Muhammad and his religion. Even the nation state's founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938) argued that Turks should not waver from their commitment to Islam as their guiding principle, yet warned the world that over the centuries Turkish progress had been hampered by a "confused and artificial religion riddled with superstitions." Atatürk's version of secularism entailed a strict state control over religion in all of its aspects through the offices of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (or Diyanet, in Turkish).

Still the ruling classes and the political leadership easily identified Islam as an irrational and retrogressive force and opted for the adoption of a lenient version of the rules and regulations laid down by the Prophet. This attitude created a quasi-insurmountable rift between ruling élite and the population-at-large, still very much attached to their religion and its arguably ridiculous superstitions.

As a result, in the post-war period politics in the Republic of Turkey evolved in the usual pattern that saw a split between the right and the left, between advocates of conservative market economics and proponents of statist intervention and socialist welfare. Islam as a topic of social mobilization or even political discourse was anathema to the Turkish system. Throughout the 1950s, the Demokrat Parti (or DP) attempted to re-connect the Anatolian landlords and their dependents to the urban centres of the country by means of appealing to Islamic sentiment and chauvinism, but in the end, the army intervened in 1960 thereby setting the tone for the coming decades. Even a politician like Necmettin Erbakan toed the Kemalist line to a large extent, only truly coming into his own during the 1990s. The RP's not really unexpected rise to power throughout the decade also gave ample opportunities to previously quite unknown political figures like Tayyip Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül. And the former took centre-stage right from the start, becoming the charismatic Mayor of Istanbul with a fondness for making sweeping statements, such as assuring that the headscarf was bound to become fashionable in Turkey and promising to tear down Taksim's Atatürk Cultural Centre (known locally by the acronym AKM) only to replace it with a big mosque.

**The New Turkey: Mass Murder of Women**

All the while Erdoğan’s popularity keeps increasing daily, his mere presence on the scene emboldening previously manacled Muslims to throw away their erstwhile timidity in the face of the Kemalist status quo that limited their experience of Islam to a government decree and proudly proclaim “alḥamdulillāh, I am a Muslim . . . alḥamdulillāh, I am a proponent of the Shariah.” Domestically, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s position appears unassailable, and the press in Turkey has largely become an AKP bullhorn. Opposition journalists face censorship and even imprisonment, with the professor of journalism Roy Greenslade stating just last month that “[p]ress freedom in Turkey is ‘under siege’, said the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) in a letter to Turkey’s prime minister.” The case of the recently temporarily released-yet-not quite free journalists Can Dündar and Erdem Gül emphatically illustrates just how tenuous the mere concept of freedom of expression has become in Tayyip Erdoğan’s New Turkey. At the same time, now-emboldened supposedly “pious” Turks are also exercising their rights; like for instance a man known only as Kadir E., who battered his fiancé Hülya B. telling the police: “I hit her, because she insulted Erdogan.” And subsequently, the police questioned the young woman on account of her having supposedly insulted the President of the Republic. In fact, violence against women has been on the increase in AKP-led Turkey. As long ago as September 2011, the independent Bianet News Centre posted on its website that the “number of women murders in Turkey [has] increased by 1,400 percent [over the past] seven years [, 2004-11]. As far as divorce cases are concerned, 85 percent of all applications in Istanbul are related to violence," adding that, "[w]hile 66 women were murdered in 2002, this figure [has] rocketed to 953 women murders in 2009." Earlier this year, the Umut Vakfı (or Hope Foundation) released a report on the issue of violence against women, calling on NGOs to conduct comprehensive studies on the issue, which it described as a "mass murder of women."

Does this now mean that the figure of Tayyip Erdoğan inspires his male followers to commit acts of violence against women?!?? After all, the AKP-led government has been actively advocating a more passive role for women in Turkish society, a more passive role as symbolized by the now really ubiquitous (or fashionable) headscarf and demure forms of attire now worn by untold women. About a year and a half ago, the President himself also told his believers (or followers, if you will) that "[o]ne cannot put women and men on an equal footing," adding poignantly that "[i]t is against nature." Actually speaking at a women's conference, Erdoğan explained that "[o]ur religion regards motherhood very highly," before stating that "[f]eminists don't understand that, they reject motherhood." About the same time, his then still close friend and ally Bülent Arınç (acting as Deputy PM, 2009-15) joined his boss remarking off-hand that "[c]hastity is so important. It's not just a word, it's an ornament [for women] . . . A woman should be chaste. She should know the difference between public and private. She should not laugh in public.” Since then, Arınç and Erdoğan seem to have grown apart, but the former’s views on the "fair sex" have probably not changed at all that much. Whereas, previous generations of Turkish politicians encouraged women to take pride in their more
active roles in Kemalist society, the present leadership of the country all but wants to turn back the clock and confine women to home, hearth, and kitchen. In the previous century, many a woman in Turkey expressed her gratitude to Atatürk for having liberated Turkish womankind from the shackles of Islamic custom, gender segregation, and a secluded life.

Lacking a Sense of Humour?!??

Tayyip Erdoğan's tendency to micro-manage the state's affair is well-known and subject to a lot of criticism, with detractors openly calling his behaviour dictatorial and un-democratic. In fact, his nostalgic appreciation of the Ottoman past might lead some to compare President Erdoğan to Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876-1909). Both leaders appear suspicious and overly concerned with their personal safety, and Abdülhamid's army of spies and snitches reporting on their fellow-citizens seems more than matched by the AKP-employed internet trolls apparently numbering about 6,000 and conducting "centralized, orchestrated social media campaigns." At the same time, Erdoğan and his AKP machinery have blocked access to 15,562 websites in 2011, 22,536 in 2012, 35,000 in 2013, 40,773 in 2014 and 96,000 last year. Whereas recent news reports indicating that Turks living in the Netherlands are encouraged to report fellow-Turks voicing criticism of the government and/or disparaging remarks about the figure of the President of the Republic are equally testament to the recurrence of paranoia in the highest echelons of Turkey's political élite. But Erdoğan's paranoia seems to go a lot further, as "hundreds of people, including high-profile media figures such as Sedef Kabas, Hidayet Karaca and Mehmet Baransu, have been detained for allegedly insulting Erdoğan," as reported at the end of last year by Press TV. During a meeting in Ankara late in 2014, the President himself curtly stated that "media should never have been given the liberty to insult." And now, Erdoğan's thin skin has also managed to create an international incident.

At the end of last March, the German satirist Jan Böhmermann appeared on the German state broadcaster ZDF hosting his regular programme Neo Magazin Royale and taking direct aim at the figure of Turkey's President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Böhmermann's show can be situated in the tradition of satirical and frankly absurd television programmes, oftentimes veering towards tasteless comedy nevertheless meant to be funny, that have become synonymous with German humour, or perhaps rather the lack thereof (tellingly, Böhmermann himself refers to his own show as a "Quatschsendung" or 'nonsense programme'). Before launching into his diatribe against Erdogan, the German appeared to be poking fun at himself, explaining that according to the German Constitution the presentation of defamatory or abusive criticism, containing ad hominem attacks ("Schmähkritik," in German), is strictly prohibited and frowned upon. And in the further course of his delivery, Böhmermann actually pretends to be testing the waters continuously seeking assurance from his co-host or sidekick that his uttered sentences would be strictly off-limits according to German law. As such, his monologue, now usually referred to as a "Schmähgedicht" or defamatory or abusive poem, in English, was true to form a compilation of ad hominem jabs at the Turkish President or if you will, a collection of personal insults, ranging from calling him "stupid, cowardly and uptight," over comparing his personal habit to that of a "pig's fart," and proclaiming that Erdoğan has a small member. But, in my opinion, the most damning aspect of Böhmermann's poem consists of its repetition of certain standard Islamophobic tropes.

Islamophobic Tropes and other Clichés

In fact, Böhmermann's performance was quite a feat as he managed to smear Erdogan as a Muslim without even mentioning the word Islam or the name Muhammad. The German comic claimed that the Turkish President habitually engages in "goat-fucking" and sends his nights watching "child-porn." These two charges are standard phrases continuously encountered in Islamophobic discourse. The slur that Muslims generally engage in sexual congress with members of cloven-hoofed, ruminant mammals has become nothing but a cliché nowadays. And, the fact that the Dutch film-maker Theo Van Gogh was killed by the Dutch-Moroccan Muslim man Mohammed Bouyeri on 2 November 2004 is a telling illustration thereof. As an outspoken critic of the state of affairs in the Netherlands, Van Gogh appeared regularly on Dutch television, and as a matter of natural course, when talking about Muslims (be they of Moroccan, Turkish or whatever descent) he simply called them "goat-fuckers." As for Böhmermann's reference to child pornography, it has to be noted that the charge that the Prophet Muhammad was a pedophile (on account of his marriage to the six-year old Aisha) has also become a much-touted cliché in Islamophobic discourse. In this way, the German comic succeeded in painting the Turkish President as your typical Islamic fundamentalist without having to take recourse to explicit references or even actual facts. In this way, the German comic hit the Turkish politician exactly where he is most vulnerable, namely at his identity as a pious Muslim. As explained above, Erdogan has turned his personal piety or adherence to the precepts of the Prophet into his personal credo, informing all aspects of his personal as well as political being.

Böhmermann effectively circumvented Article 216 of the German penal code that outlaws insulting religious belief:
“Any person who openly disrespects the religious belief of a group is punished with imprisonment from six months to one year if such act causes potential risk for public peace.” Instead, he merely insulted the figure of the Turkish President. And as a result, the Turkish President could not but be outraged and voice his displeasure: “Erdoğan demanded that the German government prosecute Böhmermann under that section, while also filing a private complaint against him. On April 15, Merkel announced in a brief statement that the German government would permit Erdoğan’s action to proceed under the ‘insult’ paragraph, but that the provision would be repealed as of 2018. German media reported much disagreement within the government about Merkel’s decision,” as elaborated by the German columnist Alex Gorlach. The public in the West was and continues to be outraged, as the micro-managing Tayyip Erdoğan now also appears to meddle in the affairs of sovereign states in the EU. On the other hand, I would argue, the mere fact that public opinion disregards Böhmermann’s blatant Islamophobia only focusing on the Turkish President’s apparent lack of a sense of humour, indicates that xenophobia and racism have now become much more acceptable traits in the aftermath of the refugee crisis and the EU’s negotiations with the Republic of Erdoğan in this regard. Even such a darling of the left-leaning West like the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has recently revealed himself to be just another white man keen on protecting Fortress Europe. A Žižek apologist might very well say that the philosopher is merely “voicing bizarre and often offensive opinions on the plight of refugees seeking asylum in Europe,” but to my mind Žižek and Böhmermann are part and parcel of the same mindset. After all, we should not forget that Bill Van Auken and Adam Haig, as long ago as 2010, described the Slovenian philosopher as a “political opportunist, though crasser and ruder.”

Every year the International Humanist and Ethical Union (or IHEU) releases a report entitled Freedom of Thought, which purports to be the “only annual survey looking at the rights and treatment of the non-religious in every country in the world.” And, rather surprisingly, in last year’s edition, Germany receives the “Rating: Severe Discrimination,” which is coincidentally the same rating that Turkey got: “Rating: Severe Discrimination.” The German Chancellor Angela Merkel did call the poem “deliberately offensive,” subsequently apparently regretting having publicly voiced her personal view. As indicated by the IHEU, in Germany “[b]lasphemy’ is outlawed or criticism of religion is restricted and punishable with a prison sentence." As a result, it seems but a matter of course that the German government acceded to a request from Ankara to prosecute Böhmermann. In fact, the CDU’s parliamentary faction leader Volker Kauder declared that “[s]atire can get away with everything, but not everything qualifies as satire," implicitly acknowledging that the comic’s "Schmähgedicht" consisted of a personal attack consisting of Islamophobic tropes and clichés that would be covered under the heading of blasphemy. Turkey and Germany thus seem closer to one another than many would like to imagine, is seems.

The mere fact that the figure of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has now become victim of what I would like to term “cultural racism” (known as Islamophobia today) should not detract from the fact that the “New Turkey” created by the AKP is a place where expressing humour and criticism have become valiant acts of resistance. Ample illustration can be found in the recent case of the journalist Ebru Umar, who was “detained on April 23 in the Kuşadası district of the Aegean province of Aydın for allegedly insulting Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan via her Twitter account.” Or, in the recent court appearance of the Turkish academic and writer Murat Belge for having written an article purportedly insulting the figure of the President. The New Turkey is a country that seems to be continuously moving towards new and more restricted horizons . . .

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