Turkey's Culture War: The Art of Fasting in the New Turkey

Reversing L. P. Hartley's by now near-proverbial 1953 phrase, Turkey specialists, historians, and commentators alike are now in a position where they can safely remark that the present is "a different country," that they really "do things differently there"... And some would argue that the country and nation state founded by Mustafa Kemal in 1923 now appears to be on the brink of disappearing as a result of the momentous changes introduced by the political movement founded by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the outset of the 21st century.

Setting the Scene: Hapless not Quite in Charge

Traditionally, Turkey was held up as a beacon of progress and modernity in the Middle East, as a country where a lenient attitude and permissive government policies had given rise to a tolerant and Westernized society, a society that was living according to the precepts of what became known as "Turkish Secularism." But this Occidental Re-Orientation of Turkish state and society was not necessarily universally welcomed and accepted. Discordant voices, singing the praises of the Ottomans and their beneficial services to the religion of Islam, occasionally managed to pierce the wall of Kemalist silence, a silence enveloping everything and everybody in a soothing hum of Turkish nationalism quietening down any considerations of Muslim solidarity and/or agitation. But the advent of Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (or AKP) has put a halt to all that, winning electoral contest after electoral contest, increasing its share of the vote time and again. The nationwide popularity enjoyed by the AKP has now even propelled the party founder to the position of President of the Republic. And as President (or Prez), Tayyip Erdoğan seems all but determined to abolish Turkey's parliamentary system, only to replace it with a presidential one (arguably similar to the state of affairs in Russia and the U.S.). In a bold first move, the Prez stopped his cooperation with the academic-turned-politician Ahmed Davutoğlu (aka Wily), effectively putting a stop to the Dynamic Duo (Erdoğan-Davutoğlu) that had been implementing the AKP policy of Sunnification at home as well as abroad. In the next instance, the Prez appointed a more malleable figure to the post of Prime Minister, the arguably somewhat hapless erstwhile Transport Minister Binali Yıldırım. The latter seems more than happy to serve all but a minor role in the country, respectfully deferring to the figure of Erdoğan whenever necessary and expedient. The hapless PM Binali Yıldırım is also happy to go along with his predecessor's programmes and to continue the erstwhile Dynamic Duo's policy of Sunnification. The AKP government has effectively altered the nation's educational system in such a way that future generations of Turkish citizens are bound to emerge from their school benches as pious and compliant Muslims. In 2014, before becoming Prez, then-still PM Tayyip Erdoğan made public declarations to the effect he wanted to raise “pious generations” to populate the country in the future.

Turkey's Culture War: A Reversal of Power Relations?!?!!

These government policies have had direct effects on Turkish society as a whole, and in this context I would like to employ the phrase ‘Culture War’ in dealing with the social and societal ramifications of the AKP-sponsored Islamic réveil that is at present taking place in Turkey. The term ‘Culture War’ refers to the struggle between two sets of conflicting cultural values. Derived from the German noun Kulturkampf, the phrase is mostly known nowadays in its American usage as a shorthand for the assertion that there is a conflict between those values considered
traditionalist or conservative and those considered progressive or modernist. Its American circulation originated in the 1920s when urban and rural American values came head to head, with the so-called Scopes Monkey Trial (1925) being one of the then-culture war’s most prominent episodes. The expression regained currency in 1991 with the publication of the book Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America written by the sociologist James Davison Hunter. The relevance of the term in a Turkish context appears straightforward, as I explained somewhere else: “In 1923, the foundation of the Republic of Turkey at the very edge of Europe led to a cultural malaise among its intellectual and political leaders alike. Established on the remains of the multi-ethnic yet staunchly Islamic Ottoman Empire, the Republic set out to emulate Western civilisation from an early date . . . chose to abandon the cultural idiom of Islam and to opt instead for the civilization of the West as Turkey’s structural and intellectual framework”. Throughout Turkey’s Kemalist period (1923-2002), Westernized elites found themselves in opposition to a pious rural population desperately clinging to its Islamic identity, yet forced to engage with the modern world and ill-at-ease with the values and habits propagated by the country's urban leadership. But now, in the 21st century, this dichotomy has been reversed. Now the urban élites reflect conservative Islamic values, arguably in line with the hopes and aspirations of the vast majority of Turks living in the countryside as well as in the country's major conurbations. The population of Turkey's urban centres has increased tremendously over the past decades, due to inward migration from the country's hinterlands. In this respect Turkey conforms to global trends, as the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) indicated in the summer of 2014 that “54 per cent of the world’s population [now] lives in urban areas, a proportion that is expected to increase to 66 per cent by 2050.” This means that worldwide erstwhile rural populations and their values are increasingly coming face-to-face with urban élites and their standards, a trend that has been coming for a long time already as the "planet has gone through a process of rapid urbanization over the past six decades" now.

**Listening to Radiohead during the Fast**

In Kemalist Turkey this used to mean that pious migrants had to contend with "sophisticated" and “modernist” urbanites, reflecting the country's political and economic leadership. But in the post-Kemalist reality created by the Dynamic Duo of the Prez and his sidekick Wily this dichotomy has been inverted. And now, the country's political and economic leadership espouses values and habits in opposition to the lifestyles and habits of Turkish urban classes. Or, that is the narrative being pushed by the AKP hierarchy and its willing spin doctors, be they journalists or mere Aktrolls populating the internet. Over the years, successive AKP governments have been at pains to increase the visibility of Islam throughout the nation and the population has responded accordingly. Whereas Turkey's urban centres used to be filled with bare-headed girls and women as well as clean-shaven men, nowadays headscarves and beards dominate the cityscape. Men and women of all walks of life are changing their habits and attire throughout the land, possibly due to social pressure and/or a sense of a genuine reawakened personal piety. At the moment, Muslims across the world are engaging in a month-long fast, abstaining from any kind of food or drink, including swimming and sexual relations, from sunrise to sundown. Known as Ramazan in Turkish, in the days of old, when the memory of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was very much alive, very few inhabitants of the metropolis of Istanbul would partake of this pious act. But, the present is "a different country," and today people "do things differently." Over the past days, Turkey's news agenda has been dominated by an act of apparently not-so gratuitous violence: a group of people listening to the new Radiohead album livestreaming event at a record shop (Velvet IndieGround) in the hip and happening Cihangir district of Istanbul (part of the greater Beyoğlu Municipality) was attacked by a violent mob apparently taking offence at this blatant transgression of respect and propriety, as alcohol was being consumed on the premises.

**Pre-Planned Provocation or Spontaneous Act!??!?**

The event took place on a Friday night (17 June) and the next day, a peaceful protest was dispersed by police using water cannon and tear gas. On the independent television station Halk TV, the journalist Ayşenur Arslan and the politician and trade unionist Süleyman Çelebi discussed the event at length. Though the mob apparently consisted of about twenty people, one man seems to have been the prime mover and main instigator, as evidenced by the available video evidence. Ayşenur Arslan identifies the main culprit as "Duygun Bilmez" and then proceeds to fill in the blanks. Though the video footage confirms that the man took offence at the consumption of alcohol during the "holy month of Ramazan," he apparently told a sympathetic paper that his actions were caused by events that had taken place earlier in the day, involving his head-scarved wife and a number of local louts, with apparently no direct connection to the Radiohead events at Velvet IndieGround. Nevertheless the Mayor of the Municipality of Beyoğlu A. Misbah Demircan took to twitter to denounce the organisers of the Velvet IndieGround Radiohead event as perpetrators of a provocative action aimed at disrupting the social cohesion of the neighbourhood during the "holy month of Ramazan." In reality though, the neighbourhood of Cihangir, which used to be the preserve of artists and
bohemians in years gone by, is at present home to numerous cafés and bars, frequented by multitudes of urbanites wishing to while away some time, while more often than not partaking of some alcoholic beverage. Ayşenur Arslan and Süleyman Çelebi contend that the above-recounted Cihangir event was nothing but a pre-planned provocative act, similar to the since debunked Kabataş event in the context of the Gezi protests in 2013, when the then-still-PM Tayyip Erdoğan at length spoke about his "head-scarved sister" who was molested by drunken louts: "Security camera footage disclosed Feb. 13 [, 2014] has revealed there was no physical attack on a woman who claimed she and her baby were attacked by up to 100 protesters in Istanbul at the height of the nationwide Gezi demonstrations for wearing a headscarf." Arslan and Çelebi see the incident in Cihangir as another orchestrated occasion meant to create moral outrage amongst pious Turks and leading to a further hardening of positions in the ongoing polarization between AKP supporters and those critical of Tayyip Erdoğan and his blatant attempt to create a Muslim nation liberated from the shackles of Atatürk who founded the nation state based on a wide and inclusive definition of the principle of Turkish nationalism unburdened by the Prophet's tenets and the rules and regulations of Islam.

**Dismantling the Nation State: Back to the Future**

The journalist Ayşenur Arslan did not mince words during her show, saying that "their goal is the Republic." Çelebi concurred and made a plea for united action to safeguard the nation. Even though she remained vague, not really pointing an accusatory finger at anyone, it seems that Arslan was clearly talking about none other than the Prez himself and his supporters. As such, as long ago as December 2013, I wrote down the following: “Opponents of Erdoğan and the AKP . . . fear that the government’s long-term goal (as arguably expressed in the AKP’s policy statement Hedef 2023) is to transform the nation state Turkey into an Anatolian federation of Muslim ethnicities, possibly linked to a revived caliphate. In this way, Turkey’s future (as a nation state) would arguably become subject to Anatolia’s past as a home to many different Muslims of divergent ethnic background. The fact that Erdoğan’s oft-repeated reference point [at the time was] the first assembly of what was to become Turkey’s parliament on 23 April, 1920, seems to render strength to such contentions. The first assembly consisted of representatives of Anatolia’s Muslim population, the then-Kemalist constituency, who had pledged allegiance to the Ottoman Sultan-Caliph, Mehmed VI."

At present, the AKP machinery also seems to play the Turkish nationalist card liberally. This is done in the context of the Ankara government’s ongoing conflict with the outlawed left-leaning PKK, which I would call a serious effort to mobilise pious Kurds and convince them to join the fold of the believers. Thus the increasing official enlistment of Islam as a social force to unite and strengthen the nation seems beyond doubt. As a result, I would now like to argue that Tayyip Erdoğan and his AKP cohorts are getting ready to launch more offensives in Turkey’s Culture War in the coming summer months, attempting to weaken and defeat the opposition and pressurise the population-at-large into openly embracing the Prophet Muhammad and the religion of Islam as constituting the only markers of Turkish citizenship and national cohesion.

This then leads me to pose the following queries about Turkey: namely whether its future will also become "a different country" and whether Atatürk’s legacy will become but a footnote in future history tomes dealing with the Anatolian peninsula during the 20th century?? And how will the summer of 2016 play out in the long run and will the Prez achieve his goals?? Will future generations of Turks look back wistfully and murmur Hartley’s original sentence to themselves with a pain in their hearts: "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there."

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