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Turkey

# The Freedom to Say “No”:

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**For the last several months in Turkey, the party-state’s agenda has been dominated by two interconnected operations: consolidation of power and elimination of opposition. The former will culminate in the constitutional referendum of April 16 this year, which will, if successful, transform Turkey from a parliamentary into a presidential republic, further strengthening Erdogan’s personal rule and making it nearly impossible to electorally challenge AKP hegemony in the foreseeable future.**

Whole cities are plastered with giant “Evet!” (Yes!) posters, which also dominates the TV channels, but opinion polls are still running surprisingly close. To shore up the nationalist vote, the state even produced a deliberately calculated diplomatic scandal with the Netherlands over the latter’s unwillingness to have Turkish ministers campaign on its territory. At the same time, dozens of “Hayir!” (No!) rallies/ events are banned for mysterious “security reasons.”

Indeed, the elimination of bases of opposition, which was intensified after the unsuccessful coup of July 2016, is now in full swing. While initiated to eliminate the sources of the coup, the state of emergency has now turned to leftist and Kurdish forces, generously applying to them the “terrorist” label. A particularly widespread form of silencing the opposition has been the firing of civil servants.

Talking to LeftEast about all this is Uraz Aydin, an editor of the Marxist journal Yeniyol, who has recently been fired from his faculty position at Marmara University. To support fired academics like Uraz, the Union of Educational Workers, E?itim Sen, has set up a solidarity fund. You can contribute to it (anonymously or publicly) by donating [here](#)

**Rossen Djagalov (RD): What I wanted to start with is the experience of being fired. At LeftEast we have been listing numbers of fired civil servants, closed media outlets, but that’s a rather impersonal picture. What did the firing look like from your point of view? What does it mean in practiced, being so fired? Do you have a sense of who produced those lists?**

Uraz Ayd?n (UA): Who made those lists is another question: I’ll return to it later on. What happened to us is not simply being fired. We have been excluded from all public service positions. With this decree, our citizenship status was downgraded. Now we are second-class citizens. Some of our rights as citizens have been removed. For example, I don’t have a passport now: it has been annulled. The technical justification is that the state can launch a court case against me and I should remain in the country. In practice, the state doesn’t want the formation of an oppositional Turkish diaspora of the kind that appeared after the 1980 coup.

While I can be legally employed by, say, a private university, given this regime of fear, I cannot imagine a private university agreeing to put on its faculty lists black-listed people like me. All my professional career—my PhD, my scholarship, my teaching, my service for my university; I am 40 year-old-now now and still a research assistant because my university administration has made a point of not promoting activist faculty—has been annulled with this decree.

The question who did it would take a longer answer. Who decided on the lists of people to be fired—we don’t know. I can speak most knowledgeably about the category I belonged to, namely, signatories of the January 2016 petition “We will not be a party to this crime.” The crime being referred to is what the Turkish state was doing at the time [second half of 2015] in the Kurdish Southeast and the choice of war Erdogan made with respect to the Kurdish movement. Erdogan had decided, “No more negotiations with the Kurdish movement. We have to go to war.” Kandil

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(the PKK leadership) was ok with this. That’s another problem we can talk about.

So, this petition was a protest against the destruction of Kurdish cities by the Turkish army. As soon as it came out, Erdogan burst out in anger against the signatories, calling us dark people, traitors, vowing that we would pay the price.

**RD: But were the lists composed by the university administrators—deans, presidents—or were they composed somewhere above.**

UA: You don’t have to be a detective of course, to find the list of signatories—they were online, but the work of compiling lists was done by universities and passed on to state. Some universities dithered—they didn’t want to let go of some of their better-known professors. Some, like Marmara, my university, waited, but there was big pressure to produce and pass on the lists. The same kind of pressure is put now on Galatasaray U, Bogazici U, Mimar Sinan U, Middle Eastern Technical U.

**RD: So in your universities, the list comprises petition signatories and who else?**

UA: In my university, it was primarily petition signatories, but taken as a whole, the biggest part of dismissed Turkish academics are suspected members of the Gülen movement (or FETO, Gülenist Terror Organization, as the regime likes to call them). We’ll never know for sure who is and who is not. I cannot speak particularly knowledgeably about them. Until the two fell out in 2013, AKP had promoted many Gülenist cadres in the academy as a counterpoint to secularists.

But specifically, the campaign against the petition signatories had three distinct functions. The first was to expel leftist militants (trade-union related or not) who had been visible in various social justice struggles at their universities. People who were on the first line of resistance. The message was also to the second line: if you are like them, you, too, will end up like this.

Another target was specifically the word “peace.” The regime wants to say to us: be careful. Never let anyone put your name and the word “peace” on the same page. This was the punishment for the West (Istanbul, and the big cities in Western Turkey) expressing solidarity with the (Kurdish) Southeast. You are in the West—so shut the fuck up—and don’t talk about what we are doing in the Southeast.

The third function has a more historical importance. In Turkey, and elsewhere as well, but in Turkey specifically, leftist ideas never achieved social hegemony, but in the sphere of cultural production, they have been hegemonic. Internationally, in the world of Turkish poetry, who do you know—Nazim Hikmet, of course; in prose—Yasar Kemal; in film—Yilmaz Guney. In cinema, poetry, social sciences, universities, the producers of qualitatively valued products are inspired by leftist ideas, which came in a certain way from Marxism, of course. So the expulsion of academics is part of the regime’s attempt to break the left’s cultural hegemony and make the conservative-nationalist perspective hegemonic. Just last week, the government created the National Culture Council. They have—the AKP has—the social base. They are consolidating it, but they need the cultural means of production. Ideology is always an abstract thing, but it is produced and reproduced in concrete, and distributed in concrete, material ways. Until recently, they lacked media. They have the media pretty much under control now. So they need cinema, they need universities, they need TV series. Cinema may be more difficult. Universities, where we are working, are a part of this terrain of cultural production that AKP wants to conquer to achieve hegemony.

**RD: Just to return to the practical consequences for you and all the other people who were dismissed, your passport has cancelled, and you are—I assume—unemployed. What do you live on?**

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UA: Just to make this clear, we were waiting to be dismissed. And waiting is really boring, paralyzing, unbearable. So when I heard that a new decree had been published, I prayed: may my name be there.

The particular decree in which my name was listed was a little too much even for some Islamists and conservative journalists. Many well-known professors were listed in it. There was big uproar and more importantly for us, big solidarity, within our colleges and departments.

**RD: Could you tell me a little bit more about the forms of solidarity. Are they organized through unions or your departments?**

UA: Both, really. Friends whom I've been working with, even colleagues who were not members of the union, who weren't leftist, but who knew me and knew that in the past I've supported people. They organized rallies in front of every campus of Marmara University. Just for Marmara University, 7 demonstrations were organized, one for each day. Even departmental administrators spoke out. The union organized this, but others contributed to this demonstration.

For the next couple of months we can live. But it will take some macro-political change for us to come back to our university.

**RD: Does this happen at every campus? Even at Kocaeli (a university in Anatolia, where signatories were immediately arrested)?**

UA: Well, when it's not the big cities, it's more difficult. In many conservative Anatolian cities local administration and nationalists regard the signatories as traitors and treat them accordingly. At places like these, they could do that with relative impunity and any form of solidarity could be quite physically dangerous.

**RD: I wanted us to shift to the more general discussion of resistance. The universities are only one of the bases of the anti-regime opposition. Resistance against the government seems consolidated in the form of the “no” campaign in the April 16 constitutional referendum that Erdogan initiated to transform Turkey from a parliamentary republic into a presidential one, that is, to make his presidency, which is legally speaking, a ceremonial position, an executive one.**

UA: You're right, every form of resistance these days is being articulated around “no.” This is the latest stage of mobilization against the AKP regime in the last four years. In 2013, Gezi was a major rebellion. And partly, it was a victory. We didn't lose then: the resistance could not have continued for years, but the regime temporarily retreated. After the elections of June 2015, we also had hope. AKP's votes fell to 41% (from 50%) and the HDP vote rose 13.1%, assuring it a place in parliament. HDP is a coalition of the Kurdish movement with other leftists and was also, for this period, supported by some sections of secular republicans. We saw the possibility to break AKP's hegemony. But the coup attempt of July 2016 has provoked a huge demoralization for the left and secularist sectors of society. We were of course against the coup but we saw also that, for Erdogan, it proved a perfect opportunity to rebuild the regime around himself. The failed coup created the best conditions for Erdogan to amass all the power to reshape society. What is happening now is a peak into how he will administer the Turkish society if he wins the referendum for executive presidency.

It is the paradise he has been dreaming for himself. But only for himself. This is why the AKP is struggling to explain its case for the new presidential system. There is no other beneficiary to the proposed constitutional reform but Erdogan and his family. The model that is being developed is not unlike that in Russia. There will be parties in the parliament that oppose the government, its policies, but all have to accept Putin's leadership. Putin is the national

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will. Erdogan, too, seeks to transform himself into “the man of the nation” (milletin adamı?). Indeed, Trotsky, in his analysis of fascism, was quite right when he pointed out that the leader is not an issue of the leader’s personality its individual peculiarities. It’s a social relation between collective demand and individual supply. He further adds: “Not every exasperated petty bourgeois could have become Hitler, but a particle of Hitler is lodged in every exasperated petty bourgeois”. I think this is also valid for Erdogan.

Anyway, after all this demoralization following the coup, the fact that people have the courage to say “no,” to put “no” on their facebook status, is really important. This may not be the last, but one of the crossroads. (Well, we Marxists, especially of the Benjaminian school, never say “the last one.” We know that even the smallest social problem or protest can potentially open up a revolutionary crisis. People think “we have to say something now.”) We may be unable to go out in the street, we may be unable to challenge the police now, but we at least have the freedom to say “no.”

At this moment, all the other struggles—ecological, trade union, gender rights struggles—are being articulated through the “no” language. In the movement for solidarity with dismissed faculty, the most important word is “no”: no to the decrees, no to the state of emergency, no to the coups—the military and the civilian ones. There are several construction projects, which have been extremely environmentally destructive. “No” these days is the slogan of the ecological movement, which is becoming integrated into the political campaign.

But it’s important to realize that it’s not only leftists or Kemalists who are opposed to the constitutional changes. A significant part of the nationalist base is also unhappy with Erdogan’s plans. After the elections of October 2015, the MHP leadership was challenged by an internal opposition and after the coup attempt it submitted to Erdogan to exclude the leaders of this opposition supposedly guided by FETO. But their base failed to get on board. They oppose the new dictatorial regime for very different, even opposite, reasons to ours. Another extreme right-wing party—BPP—declared itself in favor of the presidential regime after one hour-long meeting with Erdogan. We don’t know what transpired during that hour and what was promised, but their base remains opposed. Even the Islamist party from which today’s AKP originated—Saadet—it’s a minor party now, but historically important for the Islamist political tradition—is also on the side of “no.”

Even within the left, there is no common understanding what “no” stands for. Human rights questions and fear of dictatorship are the main arguments for “no,” and social issues are largely absent. But the implication of a “yes” vote for the rights of workers and the general social landscape would be enormous. The new regime would empower Erdogan to completely transform legislature, labor or otherwise. For the past three years, for example, strikes have been forbidden as a threat to national security. We can expect such measure to multiply with an executive presidency. However, few sections of the “no” campaign, even avowed leftists, are talking about this.

Thus, it won’t be like the French referendum in 2005, where both the radical left and Front National campaigned against the proposed EU constitution, but the leftist “no” was hegemonic. There is a possibility for “no” to be successful. But it won’t be necessarily our “no.”

It’s important what will happen afterwards. If yes is successful, the authoritarianism of the regime will increase. If no, there will probably be a reaction, too.

There are many different “no” campaigns, which for the most part rarely intersect. There are, however, some neighborhood councils of “no,” at places like Sisli and Besiktas, where members of CHP, HDP, and others, work together.

**RD: I don’t want to finish this interview without asking you the kind of solidarity from abroad Turkish leftists**

**need. We write an article now and then, tell how bad it is under Erdogan, but I am struggling to come up with practical forms of solidarity we could engage in.**

UA: Maybe three-four years ago, international pressure could have had meaning. I saw it work at my university a few years ago, when we were having an internal struggle, and MESA issued a letter that had a palpable effect. But now the universities are much less authoritarian than the whole regime, which has become increasingly impervious to foreign pressure. Of course, we are happy and grateful to see international articles, petitions—I ceased believing in petitions for a few years ago and it’s ironic that the one I did sign turned out to be probably the most important one in Turkish history and got me fired [laughs]. Maybe money? I don’t know how to formulate it: there is no hope for us. Make revolutions in your own countries. [laughs]

**RD: One last question: You said there will be reaction, no matter what the result. What does the future hold for the Turkish left?**

UA: Of course, there will be a period of reaction either way, but it’s certainly not the same what the outcome will be. If “no” is successful, it will give us the courage to resist the new wave of repression and persecution. We will be more ready to fight with this. But if it’s a “yes,” that would be a statement that the majority of the population supports this regime. It would be a lot more difficult then. This is a little too grim. To finish it on a more optimistic note, let me quote Selahattin Demirtaş, the HDP leader who said, I think already from prison, “Even in times when you are most pessimistic, look not at the tips of your toes but to the horizon, you will see hope, certainly. If you do not see it, look again, keep looking until hope appears.”

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