The Turkish State Today

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The gathering took place in the midst of a purge of academia by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) that began with a failed 2016 coup. Since then more than 6,000 professors lost their positions. (More than 150,000 government employees, teachers, and academics have been fired since the attempted coup).

Of the 21 conference participants, 14 were members of Academics for Peace, an association of scholars who support a peaceful resolution to the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. Peace Academics' 2016 petition "We will not be a party to this crime," which condemned the Turkish state's attacks on Kurdish-majority provinces, was signed by more than 2,000 scholars; more than 700 of these have been or are being prosecuted for making "criminal propaganda."

Six workshop participants had lost their university positions and the right to work in public service because of state of emergency decrees; most were facing investigations and possible criminal prosecutions for "terrorist" activity. Three were in exile abroad, while five were unable to leave Turkey because their passports had been canceled.

The oppressive political context of the conference turned it "into an act of resistance against political pressure on any critical intellectual activity, and a moment to revitalize "the optimism of the will" (xvix) according to Pınar Bedirhanolu, Çalar Dölek, Funda Hülagü, and Özlem Kaygusuz, editors of Turkey's New State in the Making: Transformations in Legality, Economy and Coercion (hereafter TNSM).

The collection of articles from the workshop is an illuminating testament to participants' commitment and perseverance in the face of extreme adversity. Most of them are scholars in the fields of political science and international relations.

Formulating a coherent argument around a collection of 15 essays is always a challenge. According to its editors the unifying theme of TNSM is the related development of neoliberalism and authoritarianism under the AKP.

Bedirhanolu et al. acknowledge that "debates on the neoliberal-authoritarian character of the state in Turkey are not new." (1) Indeed, much liberal and left political analysis in much of the world has concerned the rise of authoritarian leaders and parties in recent years. Turkey under President Tayyip Recep Erdoen and the AKP is no exception.

Mainstream accounts typically see a break between an early period of liberalization (2002-2013) and a more recent era of authoritarianism (2013-present). TNSM instead emphasizes continuity of economic policies, but ruptures at the state level.

**Making a New State**

The book's premise is that "despite its still unfolding, contradictory and crisis-prone character, there is a new neoliberal state in the making in Turkey, and the oppressive and coercive policies of the AKP regime have been
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constitutive of this new state." (emphasis in original, 3) TNSM's emphasis on "making" usefully suggests process over stasis or reversal (for example the AKP's betrayal of its founding commitment to democracy). It demonstrates with case studies the compatibility of authoritarianism and neoliberal policies and thus provides an important corrective to liberal assumptions.

Many, though not all, articles utilize a Marxist framework, and theoretical borrowings from Antonio Gramsci and Nicos Poulantzas are prominent. If studies of neoliberalism and authoritarianism are not new, TNSM is the most up-to-date and expansive English-language collection assessing recent political developments in Turkey.

TNSM's greatest merit is arguably the diversity of topics covered. Insightful articles on familiar subjects like the global political context and political economy are enriched by discussions of AKP housing policies, the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), the courts, pro-government intellectuals, gender policies, the "war on drugs," and urban policing.

A major benefit of this diversity is that the usually towering figure of Erdoğan is largely confined to the background. Instead of the Leader's polarizing personality (and criticisms of an ill-defined "populism") we see the role of different institutions in shaping people's everyday lives.

The book is divided into four sections. Part I focuses on the global political context of the Turkish state's transformation under the AKP. In the opening chapter Bedirhanolu outlines how a process of financialization beginning in 2002 has led not to a more democratic and free society, as initially promised by the AKP, but rather to a more repressive state.

Özlem Kaygusuz and Oya Aydın examine how the Turkish Constitutional Court and European Court of Human Rights permitted the gradual eradication of constitutional norms ("deconstitutionalization") in the wake of a state of emergency following the 2016 coup. Essays on foreign policy in relation to the AKP's Islamist brand of neoliberalism and the geopolitics of Turkey's decision to purchase a Russian S-400 air defense system round out the section.

Many chapters emphasize how neoliberal economics have generated political repression rather than freedom. This relationship comes through most strongly in Part II, "Politics of Economic Management."

Fuat Ercan and ?ebnem Ouz argue that the AKP's inability to transition to a regime of relative surplus value in recent years has resulted in an economic crisis. This, in turn, has fostered authoritarian measures to contain dissent.

Ali R?za Güngen and Özlem Çelik examine the growing importance of credit as a source of discipline and class project, respectively. On the other hand, Melehat Kutun interprets the "repoliticization" of Turkey since 2008 as a result of the "depoliticization" of society under neoliberal rule in the early 2000s.

Together the essays challenge common associations of capitalism with minimal state activity and non-interference in markets. On the contrary, economic management in the interests of capital has been a key component of the AKP's neoliberal project.

Domination and Coercion

It's in parts III ("Politics of Domination") and IV ("Politics of Coercion") that the diversity of subjects comes to the fore.
In Chapter 9 Zana Çitak traces the history of the Diyanet from its 1924 founding to the present.

Although created by the Kemalist government to control religion in the new nation, after a 1980 coup the Diyanet's function in representing a Turkish-Sunni identity expanded. This was largely an attempt to counter the influence of leftwing ideas, which had gained traction among workers and students in the 1960s and '70s.

The transformation of the Diyanet under the AKP, however, has been dramatic. Its personnel has more than doubled to well over a hundred thousand, while recent laws have elevated the organization's status in the government hierarchy.

Tasked with, in its own words, "keeping alive the religious, spiritual and moral values of society" (175), according to Çitak the Diyanet has become the AKP's main tool for the Islamization of Turkish society. Since the publication of TNSM in 2020 the Diyanet's influence has grown. The directorate's 2022 budget will increase by 3.2 billion Turkish liras, making it better funded than the interior and foreign ministries.

Diyanet's head, the cleric Ali Erba?, regularly makes controversial public statements and has appeared at official state events with Erdoan with increasing frequency. In October 2021 the government's official newspaper announced that the organization plans to open 17 new branches throughout the world, from Budapest to Sao Paulo. [1]

The Turkish judiciary has also been politicized, and this is Zeynep Alemdar's focus in Chapter 11. Recent prosecutions against the Kemalist (and nation's oldest) newspaper Cumhuriyet, activists from the Gezi protest movement, and Academics for Peace have had a major role in stifling the work of journalists, academics and activists.

The trials have forced intellectuals to self-censor while discouraging citizens from taking part in public demonstrations. At the same time, according to Alemdar these cases have made courtrooms "places of solidarity and resistance," particularly for Academics for Peace.

Funda Hülagü's "Domesticating Politics, De-Gendering Women" is an enlightening examination of the AKP's attitudes and policies toward women. Hülagü notes that for the AKP, the notion of gender equality is a Western construct that reflects the "female-unfriendly nature of Western modernity." Gender complementarity, by contrast, assumes that "women and men are born into their natural destinies; their worldly missions differ according to their biological sex that is not inequality but rather some divine act." (247)

Women's political function is therefore determined by their special ability to perform affective labor; their participation in politics is akin to their role in managing the household. Feminist deviations from this gendered norm most conspicuously in the gender egalitarianism of the Kurdish movement are a direct challenge to the AKP's domestication of politics.

TNSM's concluding two chapters are complimentary. They depart from the political science approach of previous articles by bringing sociological/anthropological perspectives to their topics.

Zeynep Gönen traces the vast expansion of Turkey's prison population and the criminalization of drugs, beginning in the 1970s but accelerating under the AKP, while Çalar Dölek examines urban policing with a focus on the Alt?nda district of Ankara.
For Dölek, the normalization of the "state of exception" initiated in 2016 has been reflected in the expanded presence of the police in everyday life. This is most pronounced in poor- and working-class urban areas like Altında.

Repression, Deregulation, Islamicization

Although, as briefly indicated here, the breadth of subjects covered are impressive, there are some notable gaps in TNSM. While the oppression of Turkey's Kurdish population is cited in a number of articles, there is no stand-alone treatment of the AKP government's major shift in policy on the Kurdish issue.

The breakdown of a ceasefire between the state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in 2015 has resulted in more than 4,000 deaths, the destruction of large areas in Kurdish-majority cities, and the displacement of 350,000 people. [2]

In addition to inflicting massive suffering, this shift has dramatically transformed Turkey's political landscape. The breakdown of the peace process was quickly followed by the repression of the leftist People's Democracy Party (HDP). Since 2015 more than 6,000 HDP members and supporters have been arrested while party leaders, MPs, and mayors remain imprisoned. [3]

This development led the AKP to abandon any overtures of support for Kurdish rights and instead to ally with the far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP) in 2018. The creation of the AKP-MHP "People's Alliance" shows without doubt that the AKP was never interested in Kurdish rights, pluralism or democracy.

Similarly, while a few authors cite the repression of labor organizing and strikes, there is no treatment of AKP labor policies an essential component of the state's neoliberal project.

Although since coming to power in 2002 the AKP has claimed to represent Turkey's working classes, trade union density has plummeted while privatizations and weak labor laws have contributed to a vast increase in precarious employment and workplace fatalities. Strikes are stopped by simply declaring them a threat to national security (a legacy of an anti-labor constitution implemented after the 1980 coup) while demonstrations are suppressed by police forces.

COVID-19 has become a working-class disease in Turkey. Industrial production is uninterrupted and the state provides little pandemic-related support to citizens compared with other governments. [4]

According to the International Trade Union Confederation, Turkey ranked among the world's 10 worst countries for workers in both 2020 and 2021. In addition to the hardships of the pandemic, workers' rights and freedoms have been violated by crackdowns on protests while trade union leaders were arrested and had their homes raided. [5]

TNSM would also have benefited from analysis of another institution that has been extremely important to the AKP that of education. Erdogan has long expressed a desire to create "pious generations" through the school system, and educational reforms clearly reflect this aim.

From the revision of primary school curricula and textbooks along "competency-based" and religious lines to the explosion of religious (imam hatip) schools, educational reform has been a fundamental object of the AKP government. Deregulation, privatization and Islamization (characterized as "values education") have gone
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hand-in-hand in remaking Turkish schooling

Challenging the Authoritarian State

I cite these examples not to pick out absences in an otherwise excellent book. The point is rather to emphasize that the Kurdish movement, workers, and young people will be essential to solidifying opposition to the AKP's authoritarianism in coming years.

Understandably given the context in which they were written, many articles in TNSM sound a pessimistic note. Since the economic crisis of 2018, however, support for the AKP has plummeted and, despite continuing authoritarian practices and shifting political alliances, it seems unlikely the party will be able to reverse this long-term decline. [6]

Despite close to two decades of educational reforms, young people remain disproportionately opposed to the AKP. [7] Recent campus protests over Erdoğan's imperious and unprecedented naming of university rectors as well as the skyrocketing of dorm rents in autumn of 2021 (and Erdoğan's predictable characterization of protestors as "terrorists" and saboteurs) suggest middle-class youth have not yet become "pious."

Evidence of alienation among other sectors of the population is not hard to find; the challenge, as always, is mobilizing mass discontent for the purposes of radical social transformation.

TNSM is definitely worth reading. If, however, as the editors acknowledge, studies of neoliberalism and authoritarianism under the AKP are not lacking, we might look forward to analyses of the (however weakened) state of popular struggle and organization. A worthy sequel to Turkey's New State in the Making might be something along the lines of Turkey's New Society in the Making.

Source: New Politics

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