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Turkey

Turkey: Reading the Runes

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Hats with the inscription “Turkish” in runic letters, wolf head tattoos – a rallying sign of ultra-nationalism – pendants and bracelets in the shape of a swastika openly sold on the street. The symbols of a nationalism of ethnicist and racist inspiration are in vogue especially among urban and secular youth anxious to differentiate their patriotism from the Islamic-Turkish nationalism of the Erdogan regime.

For several years in Turkey, there has been a rise in references to the Asian and pre-Islamic past of the Turks, accompanied by a more and more blatant visibility of racist remarks, whose circulation the internet of course encourages. If an ethnic ultra-nationalism and a pan-Turkic identity are not unprecedented in the political history of the country, their popularization, especially among youth, but also within the armed forces, constitutes a singular and relatively recent phenomenon related to a combination of national and international political factors.

The national-religious balance

In Turkey, nationalism constitutes the principal element, considered as almost natural, of all political formations and all ideological currents. From right to left, from secularists to Islamist conservatives, from employers' associations to unions, even though the weight of patriotism may differ, it is never absent, and it is perceived as a source of legitimacy. Only the Kurdish movement and those sectors of the radical left which solidarize with its demands, escape this.

As for ethnic nationalism, although the concept of the Turkish race was perceived as an element of national cohesion and rupture with the Ottoman past at the foundation of the republic (formally in October 1923), it was balanced over time with a nationalism based on citizenship, culture and even more on the feeling of “belonging to the Turkish nation”.

Alparslan Türkeş

However, racist and pan-Turkish ultra-nationalism, linked to the ideal of a “reunification” of the Turkish peoples of Asia, continued to survive ideologically, especially under the inspiration of Nihal Atsız, until the 1970s. According to Tanil Bora, author of several books on the issue, this current, even as a minority, retained its presence in the nationalist movement only to be finally marginalized in the 1970s. “In the conditions of civil war between the radical left and the far right represented by the MHP – Party of the Nationalist Movement – led by ex-colonel Alparslan Türkeş (1917-1997) and his paramilitary formation of “Grey Wolves”, the latter mainly recruited among the conservative-religious youth of central and eastern Anatolia, which precisely strengthened the Islamic identity within the party,” he says.

The famous “Islamic-Turkish synthesis” decreed as a dominant element of the new official ideology following the military coup of 1980 accentuated this trend even more, ultimately resulting in a split by the Islamic wing in the 1990s. “This division was also desired by Türkeş, who could no longer control the Islamic dynamics within his party” says Bora.

Secularization and ethnicization of nationalism

During the last decade of the twentieth century, faced with the dual challenge of the Kurdish rebellion and the rise of political Islam, nationalism evolved on two bases. First of all, there was “Turkic” ethnic nationalism as a reaction to the Kurdish movement in a context of “low intensity” war. It was during this period that the works of Nihal Atsız (real name Hüseyyin Nial Atzıs, 1905-1975) were republished, and their racist theses reached a wider audience. Moreover, the disintegration/implosion of the Soviet Union and its regime and the accession of several Turkish states of Asia to independence generated enthusiasm and a perspective of neo-Turkic unification (“Touranist”) which reinforced this ethnicist tendency, as Bora emphasizes.

On the other hand, and on a much larger scale, there was an exacerbation of secularist and “Atatürkist” nationalism in the face of the rise of institutional Islamism represented by Refah Partisi (Party of Prosperity) which won the municipal elections in Istanbul and Ankara in 1994 and came into the national government in 1995 as part of a coalition. “It was at this time that we witnessed the first emergence of pop nationalism” says Güven Gürkan Aştan. A political scientist at Istanbul University and a specialist in relations between the nation and militarism, Aştan has been repeatedly tried for “insulting the President” and “terrorist propaganda” because of his articles and petitions.

“This republican nationalism was generated by a sense of the threat of an Islamization of society and a division of the territory resulting in a crisis of national identity. At the grassroots level this atmosphere manifested itself in the form of the extremely widespread wearing of Atatürk and Turkish flag badges” he says. In addition to these symbols of individual identity but also the state, secular and unitary and of course “indestructible”, there were “pop” versions of national songs and marches from the early days of the Republic sung on any occasion. “But that differs from the new wave of popularization of ethnic nationalism that we are witnessing today inasmuch as it was a question of a commodification of symbols known to all and always identified with, whereas today there is a kind of discovery of a distant past, which was absent from the popular political imagination” says Aştan.

Thus, throughout the 1990s and in the following decade a new basis for nationalism consolidated, now secular and particularly present on the shores of the Aegean and Mediterranean and with its ethnicist assumptions reinforced by waves of migration from the Kurdish regions.

Sources and manifestations of the current ultra-nationalism

It is through this ideological current and an urban, young, middle class and educated social base that the renewal of ethnic nationalism initially developed. According to Tanil Bora “anti-Islamic allergy” intensified during the long period in power of the AKP and Erdogan. However, this rejection was combined with the nationalist movement’s outrage at the talks with the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party), which began in 2009 and the negotiation process with Abdullah Ocalan – leader of the PKK – initiated in 2013.

In addition, the issue of Syrian immigrants, who today number three and a half million, has reactivated cultural, traditional and historical hostility towards Arabs. “As in Atsız, the main precursor of ethnic and anti-Islamic nationalism, the Islamization of society is also perceived as an Arabization that is identified with a kind of decadence. Thus, in the face of the neo-Ottoman vision of the regime, the Islamic-Turkish synthesis, there is a quest for national identity, and it is pre-Islamic references and symbols that are emphasized”, Aştan argues.

However, the fact that new generations, younger, more urban and with a certain level of education are mobilized in

this movement, in this ultra-nationalist nebula, has, it seems, increased the quantity and the quality of the material available to an audience interested in the history, language and mythology of the Turkish tribes of the Asian steppes. “There are many more sources and materials nowadays for those who want to find legends and symbols in this area” says Bora.

Among the popular manifestations of ethnonationalism is Göktürkçe, the language of the “Celestial Turks” consisting of runic characters, such as the inscriptions found at Orkhon. [1] While online courses and videos on Göktürkçe have been very popular for several years, it is above all the inscription of the word “Turk” in runic character, on t-shirts, hats, backpacks and so on which serves as an ostentatious sign of claiming Turkish identity.

The runic letters also appear on countless Twitter accounts of young Internet users related to the movement, often accompanied by the swastika. However, the reference here is not to the Nazi swastika but to the “seal of Oz” of the proto-Turkish cosmogony signifying reincarnation in another world through union with Tengri (God). If the symbol is indeed common in many Asian cultures – and not limited to the Turks – the meaning of its use in the exhibition of race-based nationalism remains rather ambiguous. A certain sense of national pride from the fact that (even) “Hitler has stolen our acronym” can also be seen in the many debates on social networks about the meaning of the symbol. Along with the Turkish flag and Mustafa Kemal – having thus completed the Ottoman Empire – we also very often see the image of the wolf’s head again referring to the Turkish mythology that a she-wolf fed and raised the last surviving child of the Celestial Turks and thus allowed the renaissance of the Turkish people in Central Asia.

Groupuscules and political formations

Apart from the exhibition of symbols, this ultra-nationalist nebula is expressed through the journals and Twitter and Facebook accounts of a multitude of associations and groups, some organized nationally, others simply small local groups, bearing names such as “Atsız Youth”, “Turanian Movement Platform”, “Turan-Turkish Union”, “Turkic Mountain of God”, “White Turks Movement” and so on. Directly racist remarks against other ethnic groups such as Kurds, Armenians or Syrians are rare in official journals and accounts where the merits and superiority of the Turkish race are praised. It is rather on the personal accounts that the hatred of Kurds (“terrorist”, “traitor”, “underdeveloped” and often assimilated to the Armenians who constitute a kind of historical enemy) is allowed expression. At the directly political level, two issues are in the foreground. First of all, ardent support for the repression of the Kurdish movement (in Turkey and Northern Syria, or in Rojava), which is often expressed rather violently. But also, the defence of the Turkish people (Uyghour) in Xinjiang – named as Eastern Turkistan – persecuted by the Chinese authorities. Erdogan’s regime is thus criticized for having mobilized for the Syrian, Palestinian and Rohingya (Myanmar) Muslim peoples, while abandoning their Chinese counterparts to their fate.

At the level of political representation, the IYI Party (“Good Party”) led by Meral Aksener attempts to capture this secular nationalist anti-AKP dynamic. Resulting from a split with the MHP which was allied with Erdogan, the party of the former Minister of the Interior of the 1990s – the darkest hours of the war against the Kurds – adopted as an acronym the seal of the Kayi tribe which was one of the 24 tribes forming the Turkish tribal union of Oghouzes. This tribe, whose seal is made up of symbols evoking the letters IYI, was also at the origin of the Ottoman dynasty in the thirteenth century. In the parliamentary elections of June 2018, the IYI Party obtained 10% of the votes, a large part of which came from the MHP and to a lesser extent from the most nationalist fringes of the Kemalist centre-left People’s Republican Party (CHP). Even though the party relies mainly on far-right cadres from the MHP, it aims to become a centre-right formation. Thus, it does not lean towards an ultra-nationalist discourse but adopts a position which is critical of the regime on “ordinary” nationalist and secular positions (especially on the issue of Syrian migrants).

Nationalism rhymes with militarism

However, a decisive step in the popularization of racist nationalism was the resumption of war in the south-east of the country, in the Kurdish region. Following the parliamentary elections of June 2015, when the AKP lost the possibility of forming a government by itself, thanks in particular to the results of the pro-Kurdish left-wing party HDP, Erdogan put an end to the negotiation process. He had already made a nationalistic turn in the previous months, considering that the negotiations would not allow him to obtain more Kurdish votes. "Erdogan and the AKP thus opted for a military resolution of the Kurdish question. As we already observed during the war of the nineties, militarism goes hand in hand with nationalism. It was also a way for Erdogan, weakened, to establish new alliances within the state with the nationalist sectors" says Ismet Akça, a leading militarist political scientist dismissed for signing a petition for peace with the Kurdish people. The violent repression carried out by the police and special operation units (the PÄ–H and JÄ–H) in the course of the winter of 2015-2016 and the traces it left in ravaged neighbourhoods were relayed through social networks and the media.

"We then witnessed an assortment of symbols, slogans, oaths and wall hangings which were Islamic-nationalist on the one hand and pre-Islamic-Turkic on the other" he says. Among the latter is particularly the extremely widespread wearing of mufflers and shields embellished with rune letters, or images of wolf heads on uniforms and helmets. More expressive are the inscriptions on the walls such as "If you are Turkish be proud, if you are not, obey", "Abortion should be free for whores, otherwise it is we who must take care of their offspring", "You must submit to the Turk", "The fangs of the wolf are blooded, be afraid", "You will see the strength of the Turk" and so on. According to Ismet Akça "just as in the 1990s, the climate of war and patriotic exaltation is not limited to militarized regions and spreads throughout society. There is therefore another period of popularization of ultra-nationalism, but obviously the symbols change from one period to another".

Having been debated in parliament at the initiative of HDP deputies, the wearing of badges, stickers and other material not in accordance with the regulations was finally banned by the armed forces. However, many testimonies indicate that the wearing and the exhibition of these nationalist symbols is still very frequent not only among soldiers at the front (in Afrin in Syria for example) but also among ordinary soldiers performing their military service.

If the learning of the alphabet of the celestial Turks and the ostentatious display of mythological symbols could be perceived as a kind of sub-culture, reactionary but still limited, the atmosphere of nationalist conflagration and militaristic effervescence provoked by the regime has allowed this anti-Islamic ethnic nationalism to unfold while combining with that of the government. "What is both distressing and frightening is that despite the range of different nationalisms that already existed in Turkey, it was not enough ..." sighs Professor Güven Gürkan Ä–ztan.

PS:

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[1] Etienne Copeaux relates the history of these inscriptions: "South of Lake Baikal, but on the territory of present-day Mongolia, flows the river Orkhon, tributary of the Selenga, which flows into the lake. On the banks of the Orkhon a culture developed in the seventh and eighth centuries that has left vestiges, including stelae on which are engraved texts in ancient Turkish and Chinese. These are the oldest works in the Turkish language, dated by specialists of the early eighth century. These texts, very elaborate and very beautiful, tell the story of the "celestial Turks" (Göktürk), a political organization headed by a "kaghan" (khan or kagan). Rather than an empire, the celestial Turks controlled an area of military intervention and raids, extending from the Khangai mountains (the supposed site of the mythical forests of Ä–tüken) to the west of China, between Siberia and Tibet, and at times from the Aral Sea to the Chinese Wall.