Why friendship is always welcome

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Is ‘civil society’ a special product of the historical development of certain Western societies? Can we talk about ‘civil society’ in Africa, in India, in Paraguay? These questions remain largely unanswered – indeed, rarely raised.

Until the 1980s and during that decade, the *weakness*, if not the ‘absence’, of civil society in Turkey was taken for granted. Most of us agreed that an authoritarian state trying to steer a traditional Muslim society towards modernisation left little room for any civil initiative. The maxim of the Spanish king, ‘Everything for the people, nothing by the people’ could easily have been the guideline for Turkish modernisers in the first half of the 20th century. The Republican state had inherited the repressive mechanisms of the Ottoman state of the 19th century as well as its mostly illiterate peasant masses. These masses now had to be transformed into the citizens of a modern society by *cadres* who, having received a modernist-Westernised education, were prepared for the chores of nation-building.

The introduction of a multiparty parliamentarian system in 1946, which attempted to conform to the democratic climate that prevailed in the wake of the Second World War, the victory against Nazism, and the emergence of the United Nations, was a significant step for Turkey, though not an unproblematic one.

The lack of a democratic political culture usually creates a vicious circle. It provides the justification for paternalist and authoritarian elites to continue in their paternalist and authoritarian rule; and this in turn hinders the growth of such a culture. The first elections that can be considered ‘free’ were held in 1950 and resulted in the victory of the Democratic Party, established in 1946 by those members of the Republican People’s Party who had become increasingly critical of the economic and social policies of Turkey’s single-party regime. This was a ‘changing of the guard’ (or ‘vanguard’) within the family. Even so, it was a step too far, as the first military coup took place in 1960. This would be followed by the intervention of 1971 and the total takeover in 1980, which put in place the legal structure and institutions still shaping our society to a large extent.

While this structure, caught between the stern patriarchalism of the Republicans and the plebiscitarian authoritarianism of the Democrats, left little room for the development of democratic values and principles, it inevitably opened up certain crevices for these, as well as for a modest expansion of civil society under the protective wing of clientelist party politics. The system of checks and balances, as reflected in the Constitution of 1961 and laid down by the military rule of the time, was designed to protect the educated urban population from the ‘misrule’ of a populist party enjoying the votes of unenlightened rural masses whom it could easily ‘deceive’. In attempting this, the new dispensation also reduced the traditional power of the executive, making possible the emergence of the ‘left’ in Turkish political life. The socialist Turkish Workers’ Party was able to put 15 members into Parliament in the 1965 elections.

The early socialists were probably the first green shoots of a modest flowering of Turkish civil society, imperceptibly expanding beyond the umbrella of the paternalist, omniscient and omnipotent state. The paradox is that the structure of politics in Turkey transformed them before they could transform it. The socialist movement, fragmented into numerous factions and fractions throughout the 1970s, nevertheless retained as its common denominator the ‘democratic centralism’ of Comintern parties, which went hand in glove with the modernist political practices of native tradition.

In spite of all its shortcomings, the socialist left provided the one political channel Turkey had to the rest of the world. All other political parties were 'native' and 'national' and studiously immune from 'foreign influences'; at least this was their contention. The liberals had especially little to do with the *political* liberalism of the West; the Social Democrats were cautious to keep their Kemalism free of the taint of foreign versions of socialism or Marxism. The Islamism of the National Salvation Party or the Grey Wolf movement around the National Action Party naturally had little respect for anything 'alien' to this country.

The 1980 coup terminated even this modicum of diversity. Ostensibly against the 'communist threat', it reinforced the 'democracy-proof' character of the state system with less than a decade to go until the fall of the Berlin Wall. But such myopia was hardly a source of great embarrassment to the rulers of the 1980 coup, because their move was designed as a return to the 'spirit' of the 1930s, and consequently to the 'single-party' ethos of the earlier days of the Republic. This was to be done within the framework of a multiparty system. Accordingly, the parties were to be only nominally distinct. The Army was to have a central place within the entire system, exerting its influence through the National Security Council, an 'advisory' body composed of the high command plus certain members of a cabinet chaired by the President of the Republic who, as a rule, is a representative of, and spokesman for, the state.

The coup of 12 September 1980 has left its mark on Turkish society ever since. The political 'establishment' – parties that were re-established in conformity with the legislation of the period – have so far demonstrated a remarkable quiescence and adaptability in conforming to its logic. Although they all complained about the restrictions, the system was not seriously challenged. Strangely enough, it was the period of Turgut Özal that was the most 'subversive', in the eyes of the generals of 12 September. Those parties and politicians most brusquely swept away by the coup, when they came back to positions of power, as they all did, proved much more loyal to these 'single-party-period' values and procedures than Özal, who in many ways was a direct product of the intervention.

In contrast to the political establishment, what can be called 'civil society in Turkey' grew in opposition to the policies and practices of this period. The regime tried to annihilate the socialist left and was successful to a large extent. But the disappearance of this 'orthodox opposition' was balanced by renewed vitality in the civil terrain that has continued to this day.

This means partly that a lot of the people active in various left-wing movements now appeared in the guise of civic activists, working in human rights groups, women's groups or environmentalist groups. This sometimes had its disadvantages. The Realpolitik power politics of the old structures could – and often did – cast a blight on burgeoning civic organisations. Human rights action, in particular, was a danger zone, because it could more readily be seen as the substitute sphere for militant action in a society where most of the traditional channels for this kind of socialist politics were closed.

But had anything substantial changed during the 1980s to make Turkish civil society, generally considered so weak, now became lively enough to begin to invite comment? Several changes had indeed taken place.

A new dawn

The most important structural change concerns the business community. Throughout all these years, from the 1950s to the 1990s, industries sprang up in many parts of Anatolia; commerce thrived; and older enterprises got more firmly entrenched. Together with all this physical change, a generational shift should also be taken into account. In a society like Turkey, where capitalism had to be built from scratch, the state played a very important role in the economy, apart from running its own enterprises. This left the Turkish bourgeois class entirely dependent on the state, and, consequently, totally subservient

with respect to the political authorities. But by the 1980s, a new generation of owners, as well as a rapidly expanding managerial class, were assuming more and more responsible positions in business. They were more open than most social layers to adapting Western ways, not only in their managerial skills, but also in their daily lives. At the end of the 1980s, they could see clearly that communism had ceased to be an international threat, thus rendering superfluous the traditional defensive (and quite oppressive) measures of the state.
On the other hand, they could also see that the traditional 'security'-oriented cadres of the state mechanism were becoming increasingly obsolete in a changing world and that moreover, their customary methods of dealing with problems could very easily prove counterproductive to a dangerous degree.

In short, the business class felt successful and mature, and demanded a larger 'say' in running the country.

Similar developments could be detected throughout civil society. Again, from the 1950s onwards, there was tremendous social change. The urban population increased, forming the majority, while rural society also kept on increasing, not in proportion, but in absolute figures. Education spread in the new urban centres and there was increasing demand for the professions and services. However, this changing society could not find space for itself in a Turkish political structure that remained quite static. The politicians were by now a separate caste, with their own procedures and traditions, shaped by pre-capitalistic power relations and political mores. Their archaic manners and the kind of relations one had to endure in the party structure were not at all attractive to educated people in the professions or the new urban elites. The left opposition, on the other hand, pursuing its Leninist, or Maoist, or Guevarist models to achieve a 'Turkish Revolution', did not offer any feasible kind of path forward for such people. Far from it: the many who joined a certain group as students, typically gave up in utter disillusionment a few years later.

Such people found activism in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) more rewarding than any of the older structures. Consequently, there was a proliferation of NGOs, especially during the 1990s.

A third factor to be mentioned, the least material of them all, has to do with the atmosphere and the vocabulary of the world in general after the end of the Cold War. 'Civil society', 'non-governmental organisation', 'civic activism' – these and all related terms suddenly appreciated in value all over the world, to the rather dangerous extent that they became 'buzzwords' for organisations that could never actually deliver half as much as they promised. But this also increased the dynamism of civil actors in Turkey – it certainly provided them with a certain prestige and protection.

This terminology is now here to stay. The price to pay for such an 'achievement' is an evaporation of content as its terms become part of the arsenal of inanities of professional politicians and bureaucrats and the mainstream media, to be employed – or deployed – on many a suitable and unsuitable occasion.

'Europe'

The European Union and the question of Turkey-ever-being-a-member has been the focal point of debate since the beginning of the 1990s. It has developed into a 'code-name' for 'democracy'. In this society where the internal dynamics for democratisation were habitually weak, the prospect of joining the EU has become the readiest motivation and justification for democratic demands.

This has led to a very interesting situation. All political ideologies as well as all institutions and bodies and social strata are affected and reshaped by the European question. The left is divided, as usual, but the old ideologies of imperialism still weigh heavily on the majority, it seems, to turn them 'against' in a rather lukewarm fashion. However, even among the supporters of the Grey Wolf movement, there are some who are strenuously 'for' Europe. The bourgeoisie in general is strongly in support though there are some – a few – who

abhor the idea. Within the bureaucracy one observes the same division: obviously, the balance in the Armed Forces tilts in favour whereas among teachers, probably, it is the other way round. In every newspaper there will be a few columnists pouring contumely on Europe though here, again, the general balance is very much in favour.

The positions that the governing party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), has taken on various occasions have been interesting, and perhaps even baffling for some observers. Their very staunch positive attitude regarding membership of the EU is probably the most important among them. It is crucial not only in a national sense, in terms of the destiny of Turkey, but also as a commitment that can have an impact on international Islam. How is it that a political party with obvious Islamist affinities opts so clearly for universal democratic principles embodied in the EU? This attitude is evidence of belief within the party that such democratic principles are indeed the main safeguard for the future of the party itself. The so-called 'post-modern coup of 28 February' which ousted Erbakan and his Welfare Party from power in 1997 was probably the major single event contributing to their new way of thinking. But behind this lies all those years of political effort, with innumerable lessons and experiments in a multi-party parliamentarian system.

On the threshold of the 2002 elections, Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party was the one contending political party with a character that differed from the status quo ordained by the laws and constitution of 12 September. The others, from Ecevit's 'left' to Bahçeli's 'right' or Yılmaz's 'liberal', all fitted the definition of 'state' parties dominated by a strongly xenophobic nationalist ideology. The result was the landslide of the 2002 elections, which swept them all away. Apart from the AKP, only the Republican People's Party (CHP) was able to put representatives into parliament, and its sole merit for deserving this favour from the electorate was the fact that it had been out of parliament (and therefore not visible or audible) during the previous term.

In this new divide, which the question of Europe has created, many roles have been reversed. Many Kemalists, adherents of these elitist and forceful drives for Westernisation, have now become opponents of the West. The Kemalists draw their intellectual ammunition for this stand from the socialists (of several Marxist denominations) the majority of whom have decided to remain faithful to a kind of 'third world anti-imperialism'. The so-called 'left' including also the CHP and Ecevit's Democratic People's Party (DSP), where nationalism and isolationism have always predominated, has thus transformed itself into the champion of conservatism in Turkey, siding with the Kemalist state and its most anti-democratic elements on every major issue. Conversely, the AKP, trying to define itself as 'conservative democrat' (to avoid more direct references to Islam), has become a 'subversive' and also 'revolutionary' force, pushing for social change.

Small events, big results

We cannot talk of a perfect equilibrium in this quite complex situation. The shift in balance is admittedly slow and gradual but, in the final analysis, it tilts in favour of Europe and democracy. As such, it resembles the Gramscian 'trench war' – a war of position rather than a frontal attack – in many ways. But the whole thing is very precarious and small events can easily produce big results.

In the midst of all this historical/political turbulence, the social dynamics of Turkey have pulled or pushed the country increasingly in the direction of 'civil society' over the last 40 or 50 years. The country's rigid political suprastructure and institutions allow little reflection in state behaviour of these changes that are taking place on a societal level. But as the state resists, its defensive walls get thinner and thinner. It becomes very difficult to dam the currents influencing political life in general.

The socialist left in its heyday had a negative effect on civic

activism in Turkey: 1968, which triggered off so many new social movements and gave rise to so many new forms of democratic struggle throughout Europe and the West, in Turkey sealed the dominance of orthodox (one may say, 'Stalinist') socialist politics. This kind of 'opposition' had no more of a benevolent attitude towards the growth of NGOs (which, by definition, it could not control) than the traditional state mechanism.

Paradoxically, and unwittingly of course, the 1980 coup played a positive role in the development of civic activism on two specific counts. By hitting hard the orthodox left, which was making a point of rendering itself obsolete, it abolished the source of inhibition for the democratic-libertarian movements. At the same time, by molesting every possible 'unorthodox' (that is, not sufficiently 'national' or 'nationalistic') tendency or initiative in society, and forcing everything to meet Procrustean norms of 'correct behaviour', it further contributed to the cleavage between 'state' and 'society', thereby elevating 'human rights' into a common platform suitable for every form of opposition in society.

These last sentences convey the impression that the bugle call for civil society in Turkey was finally blown. So, what happened? Why is it that there was no brilliant advance after all?

There are several reasons. One of them was the protracted fight of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) against the Turkish state. The PKK launched an armed struggle in 1984, which continued uninterrupted until 1999, when its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, was taken captive in Kenya. Although the Kurds suffered by far the larger number of casualties, many Turkish soldiers or state personnel of other sorts were also killed or injured. The effect of such losses, combined with the effect of the ever-present nationalistic propaganda, once more brought the people closer to their state. The impact of democratic opposition or human rights campaigns was effective only in reaching certain better educated and urban sections of society under such conditions. The rural people or the newly emigrated, semi-urbanised masses in the cities quite understandably responded not to this new discourse but to the time-revered clichés of state propaganda.

In the 1990s, the problem – or 'danger' or 'threat' – of Islamic fundamentalism was added to this violence. Those sections of the Kemalist intelligentsia who at one time had flirted with left-wing ideas and ideologies sufficiently perhaps to sympathise with the democratic demands of the more approachable spokesmen of the Kurdish population, had no patience for Islamists whom they saw as the cause for backwardness in society and whom they blamed for everything that went wrong in the process of modernisation. For them, it came more naturally to form an alliance with followers of General Evren than to look for every possible means of rapprochement with the Islamists.

Once again, in altered circumstances, the state rose to the challenge of refreshing the loyalty towards their authoritarian rule, of large sections of the urban (and Kemalist) intelligentsia. This, of course, involved enlisting certain important social institutions, primarily the press, the educational apparatus, and the centrally driven universities, in support of state policies. It quite successfully pitted its traditional discourse of 'threats', 'subversive activities', 'the danger of separation' and so forth, against the discourse of 'human rights and democracy'. It was able to recoup part of the position it had lost through the universally harsh policies of the military intervention of the 1980s.

But the question of Europe, tied closely to that of democracy, as mentioned above, has continued to stem the advance of the conservative forces.

A sudden earthquake

Civil society, or civic organisations, or civil values, are quite fragile objects and, at least in the short run, cannot compete with or take on such strong forces and ideologies. Their influence may be, and perhaps

is, more enduring, but they are not weapons for close combat.

Civil organisations can be more effective under conditions and on terrain that is shaped by other organisations. This is to say that in the absence of political parties or movements that make a point of struggling for further implementation of democracy and human rights, civil organisations by themselves cannot be expected to be the sole agents of social and political change. This 'lack', however, has been a conspicuous feature of the Turkish political scene, especially since the intervention of 12 September. Almost the whole burden of democracy and human rights was left on NGO shoulders, as the political parties chose the more comfortable 'conformist' position.

The older problem, habitual behaviour in a highly centralised society, where almost any social initiative comes from above and is followed through there also, means that creating a new culture for NGO work is a sufficiently formidable undertaking in itself.

To the extent that it exists, the state response to NGO activism has not been one of blatant repression and coercion, though that also occasionally surfaces in a country where security forces are conditioned to certain forms of thought and action. In a post-Cold War world, where an anti-communist rhetoric can hardly be taken seriously, but there is universal acclaim for NGOs and civil society (albeit sometimes little more than lip service), it is difficult for any state to adopt seriously repressive methods for dealing with this kind of organisation.

The Turkish state, consequently, has instead chosen to remain impassive and unresponsive. In civic work, success acts like fuel. People come together to foreground a certain grievance, and expect to overcome it at the end of their efforts. If no improvements are achieved, any motivation for this kind of work is bound to seep away. Starting with the Constitution of 1982, the forces for the status quo in Turkey have been incredibly successful in keeping every major grievance immune from any significant improvement.

This, combined with the tradition of top-down initiative, has checked the growth of civic activism, though not all aspirations for change have been suffocated. The aspirations have remained, encouraged by the more concrete prospect of Europe. But practical change has been blocked by the existing political parties, acting in unison with the forces of the status quo. Now at last, however, the presence of the AKP is beginning to disturb the seemingly unassailable balance of forces. Already, since the 2002 elections, this new political phenomenon has begun to effect some spectacular change and progress in the direction of democracy. In having its own different approaches and objectives, the AKP is breaking the mould of what has for so long been expected of any political party, let alone a party in government. In resolving to join the EU, it has propelled Turkey on to an open-ended path of European-style normalisation.

Unforeseeable events have also helped. The tragic earthquake of 1999 was revealing. Faced by such a catastrophe the state, paternalist 'protector' of society, appeared struck dumb, like a helpless victim of stage fright, unable to think or act because the threat was not Communism or Separatism or Fundamentalism. When Turkish NGOs rushed to the scene, and help began to pour in from abroad, part of the state mechanism managed to retrieve its implacable animus against anybody acting outside its control, and once more tried jealously to regiment the recovery process. There were, however, other state agents by now, that did not wish to function as a 'blockade' at least on this occasion. In short, this tragedy bestowed many valuable lessons on various sectors of Turkish society: the concept of 'civil society' certainly gained some flesh.

So now we come to the question of 'the future'. What new growth can we expect in such a state of affairs? Of what are Turkish NGOs capable? What can European NGOs do?

Links across Europe

The crucial point is that the link between Turkey and the EU should not be severed. It is not easy for a society that has lived through such an experience as the one Turkey has, to digest the consequences, and to reach out to standards that qualify us for western European-type development. Therefore, full maturation for full accession may still take a longish time. In fact, nobody in Turkey thinks it will be very quick.

On the other hand, it is not a ‘mission impossible’, as some people in Europe tend to believe. The crucial question, to reiterate, is not the duration spent in the ‘waiting room’; it is the assurance that there cannot be any unwarranted and unexpected expulsion from that room – no wall of prejudice ultimately barring the entrance.

Making this clear to European public opinion is something that European NGOs can and should do. But a much more important helping hand is the co-operation they can give to Turkey’s NGOs in the preparatory period.

If the course of events in Turkey continues without any drastic interference in the steady progress towards integration with the European Union, as I am assuming in this article, this will see Turkish NGOs up against far fewer *political* problems in the coming decades than in the past.

On the other hand, once such political obstacles are cleared away, the seriousness of economic, cultural and social problems will manifest themselves in all their urgency: they have to be the new targets on which NGO activity will fasten; the new criteria by which it will be judged. I shall touch upon only a handful examples of such problems, to give you an idea of the challenge ahead.

The number and ratio of people working in the agricultural sector in Turkey is incomparably greater than in any country in the European Union. The number of women employed in any kind of work in Turkey is incomparably smaller than in any EU country. The system of social security is in a shambles and apparently no one has a clear idea of reforming it. The health service is in no better a condition. The system of education has very serious problems and extremely inadequate financial support. This is so from primary school to university.

With the strong centralist tendencies of the administration, local government needs to be given a lot of autonomy, but also a far higher sense of responsibility and a better appreciation of local culture, together with much more sensitivity to environmental issues. In other words, centralist rule is bad, but decentralisation also has its own dangers.

The remnants of ‘vendetta’ and other obsolete values and traditions, as exemplified in so-called ‘honour killings’, are still visible. Legal measures by themselves are not sufficient to deal with such pre-modern practices.

In addition to many such non-political problems, political problems, albeit in a changed form, will also endure. The fighting in the east and the south-east, which darkened the life of the whole society throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, was horrible enough. It has left many scars, physical and moral, to deal with. War is formidable, but building peace has its own problems and is never an easy process.

In the same way, democratisation, on every level, for instance the lifting of bans on language, means the introduction of a totally new cultural regime, which needs sensitive and co-operative effort.

These are only a few of the Herculean tasks facing Turkish civil society organisations in the near future, with or without the feeling of welcome relief from sabotage by forces in the status quo. In all these areas, assistance from the NGOs of other countries will be of inestimable value. The mere fact of collaboration with foreign NGOs for a common cause is an antidote to the xenophobia injected deep into our body politic for so long. That this, in itself, is a great asset, was experienced deeply in Turkey at the time of the earthquake. Not the quake of course, but friendship offered in this way will always be welcome – a healthy, refreshing experience.