

Turkey : Tearing down the Ankara Wall (in slow-motion)

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Twenty years ago, in November 1989, the Berlin Wall came down. It took just a few weeks to tear it into pieces. It took only a little more than that to disestablish the East German state apparatus. In January 1990, the infamous Stasi, "The Ministry for State Security," was stormed by people who demanded the destruction of their "personal files," and, ultimately, the end of communism.

Now, to get what is happening in Turkey these days, you need to realize that there is an "Ankara Wall" as well, but a less visible one. A revolution is taking place to tear this wall down, too, but it is a much slower and erratic one. Moreover, the main actors in this slow-motion revolution are Turkey's religious conservatives, who, with their moustaches and headscarves, don't look to Western eyes as familiar as the beer-toasting Germans of 1989.

The birth of the hybrid system

To get the story correctly, one needs to understand the beginnings correctly. In the late 1920s and 30s, Turkey was constructed as a "republic," but not as a democracy. The leader, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, was a passionate Westernizer, but the West was not an entirely pretty place at the time. Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, along with the Soviet Union, were seen as successful models, and the Kemalist regime did not hesitate to incorporate some of the elements of these totalitarian regimes.

Recep Peker, the powerful secretary-general of the Republican People's Party, or CHP - Mustafa Kemal's party - traveled to Nazi Germany in 1935 and came back with not just a deep sense of admiration, but also a program to implement. A year later, Turkey was officially declared a one-party state. Peker also formulated the famous "Six Arrows" of the Kemalist ideology, which conspicuously excluded democracy, liberty or liberalism. In fact, Peker publicly denounced liberalism as "high treason." Besides the liberals, the two main enemies of the regime were the religious conservatives who refused to evolve into the ultra-secular "Homo Kemalicus," and the Kurds, who resisted acknowledging that they were, according to Kemalism, "mountain Turks."

So, at the end of the 1930s, Turkey was just one of the several totalitarian states in Eurasia. What would turn the country into a unique case was World War II.

The war ended fascism, at least in Europe, and countries became either Western-style liberal democracies, or Soviet-satellite tyrannies. Turkey, which skipped the war by remaining neutral, became none. It luckily joined the Western alliance, but it neither questioned its inter-war totalitarianism, nor disestablished its infrastructure.

What emerged from this was a hybrid system : A quasi-democracy existing side-by-side with a still-totalitarian state ideology and establishment. Moreover, this establishment was supported by a certain segment of society, mainly the urban upper class, who had benefited from the era of High Kemalism, and identified itself with the its ideals.

That's why when military coups took place in Turkey against democratically elected governments,

especially in 1960 and 1997, the culprit was not just the Kemalist military, but also its civilian allies. Before the 1960 coup, some university professors and some journalists openly called the Army “to duty,” and cheered for the junta when it imprisoned, abused and finally killed the elected prime minister. (This is something you should keep in mind when trying to understand the current Ergenekon case.)

The AKP in perspective

What has been happening since 2002, when the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, came to power, is that the hybrid system is slowly falling down. For the first time, a democratically elected government is assuming full power, and daring to change the Kemalist positions on many critical issues – from Kurdish rights to the definition of secularism, from a solution in Cyprus to the attitude toward Armenia.

It is not an accident that the AKP is widely supported by the three main victims of the Kemalist era : the Kurds, the liberals and, of course, religious conservatives. The latter’s leading role is also not an accident.

As evidenced by the role of Catholicism in the fall of communism in Poland, religions tend to provide the most durable resistance to modern totalitarian ideologies. It is lucky for Turkey that this religiously inspired resistance almost never turned violent, and, to the surprise of most, it even has turned pro-Europe in the last decade.

But all this does not mean that the AKP is all wonderful. It is, after all, a Turkish political party that grew within the country’s decades-old patrimonial and nepotistic political culture. It abandoned its old Islamist ideology, but the traces of the past sometimes still surface. Its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, is brave and reformist, but also growingly intolerant towards criticism. (The recently levied astronomic tax fine on the Doğan Media Group seems not unrelated to that.) The AKP’s members have evolved a lot throughout the years, but most are still far from being principled democrats.

So, foreigners would be not only right, but also helpful in criticizing all these problems in the AKP. But they should be careful not to support those who want to re-enact the Ankara Wall, and restore something even worse than the old hybrid regime.

That’s a danger that is still clear and present.

Sources

Source : HDN, le 24.11.09