A fight for the soul of the new Turkey

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It is one of the most strategically important of nations - poised geographically, and symbolically, between Europe and Asia. But the tensions at the heart of Turkey are becoming increasingly severe. A fierce struggle is taking place between modernity and tradition, Islamism and secularism, democracy and repression. The outcome could have an explosive impact on us all

In "*Istanbul : Memories of a City*" , his mournful love letter to his hometown, Orhan Pamuk refers to the peculiar melancholy that haunts the grand buildings and dilapidated backstreets of the capital of the old Ottoman empire. He calls it 'huzun', a Turkish word that refers to spiritual loss or yearning. According to the Nobel Laureate, the monumental architecture and the little arches and fountains combine to 'inflict heartache on all who live among them'. This, he writes, is because they 'are reminders that the present city is so poor and confused that it can never again dream of rising to the same heights of wealth, power and culture' of its glorious past. Reading these lines one wonders if it's only coincidence that the city's most famous landmark is known as the Blue Mosque.

Last week at a party for Pamuk in the verdant grounds of Bogazici University, poverty was nowhere to be found, but there was no shortage of confusion. Istanbul's intellectual elite had gathered to pay homage to Turkey's most esteemed literary son, the internationally renowned author of Snow and several other bestselling novels. And as they sipped chilled wine on an immaculate lawn overlooking the Bosphorus strait, the conversation was rich with claim and counterclaim. There was going to be a coup. There was not going to be a coup. The nation was in danger of lurching towards Islamism. Islamism was no threat at all. The democratic health of Turkey was dependant on joining the European Union. Turkey would thrive without the aid of the EU. And so it went on, back and forth, round and round, into the cooling spring night.

The Turkish intelligentsia are unusual in that non-intellectuals - in particular state lawyers - pay keen attention to what they have to say. Though mindful of prosecution, they are no strangers to lively debate. But the events of recent months and weeks have added an extra urgency to their opinions. Back in January, Hrant Dink, the editor of Agos , a newspaper for the Armenian community, was shot dead outside the paper's city centre offices. Dink had been an unyielding campaigner for recognition of the Armenian genocide of 1915-17.

To describe the death of up to a million Armenians during the first world war as 'genocide' is a criminal act in Turkey and Dink was one of scores of writers charged under a penal code - particularly the notorious Article 301 - that prohibits 'insulting Turkishness'. He had also received numerous death threats from ultra-nationalists. 'I do not know how real these threats are,' he wrote, not long before he was gunned down, 'but what's really unbearable is the psychological torture that I'm living in. Like a pigeon, turning my head up and down, left and right, my head quickly rotating.'

A 17-year old youth named Ogun Samast was arrested for the murder but it is widely believed that elements of the Turkish state were also involved. This suspicion was only deepened when newspapers published photographs of police posing with Samast as he held a Turkish flag and stood in front of a poster of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey and irreproachable nationalist hero.

Dink was the first Turkish journalist to be killed since the Nineties, a decade in which no fewer than 37 journalists were murdered, and it was feared that his slaying would mark a new campaign of terror against writers and thinkers. Over 100,000 mourners turned out for his funeral under the slogan 'We are all Armenians', which is a dangerously subversive statement in Turkey.

Then last month the Prime Minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, nominated his foreign minister, Abdullah Gul as the country's new president. Gul, like Erdogan, was an outspoken Islamist in the Nineties, but both men have moderated their language and position since coming to government in 2002. Indeed in many ways their Justice and Development Party (AKP) has proven the most liberal and democratic government in Turkish history, increasing freedom of speech, successfully encouraging girls to go to school, and making a determined case to join the European Union.

Still, Gul's appointment made a number of Turks uncomfortable, not least because the presidency is a largely symbolic position, and Gul's wife wears a headscarf, perhaps the most incendiary symbol in Turkish politics. Though Turkey is overwhelmingly a Muslim country, the state has been staunchly secular since Mustafa Kemal founded the republic out of the ruins of the Ottoman empire in 1923. 'The Republic of Turkey,' proclaimed the self-styled Ataturk (father of the Turks), 'cannot be the land of sheikhs, dervishes, disciples and lay brothers.'

Ataturk banished religion to the private sphere and set about transforming the defeated empire into a modern nation state. He abolished the caliphate, removed religious courts, changed the written script from Arabic to Latin, the calendar from Islamic to Gregorian, announced a new Western dress code of jacket and trousers and forbade the fez. In a famous speech he decreed its replacement as a cover with a brim. 'I want to make this clear,' he said. 'This headcovering is called a "hat".'

Secularism has remained more of a nationalistic than democratic concept in Turkey, not a means of securing rights so much as excluding what the state sees as wrong. Since Ataturk's death in 1938, the Kemalist philosophy has become the state's quasi-religion with Ataturk as its undisputed prophet. Headscarves, for example, are not allowed in government or civic buildings, including schools and universities, while Ataturk's likeness enjoys ubiquity on posters, badges and even in the corner of TV screens. And it is the military that is the vigilant and ruthless protector of Ataturk's image and legacy.

Rather like Louis XIV, the Turkish military is the state. On four occasions since 1960 it has intervened to bring down elected governments. The last time was in 1997 when the coalition government of Necmettin Erbakan was forced to resign in what became known, with typical Turkish irony, as the 'postmodern coup'. Erbakan had come to power using provocative Islamist rhetoric. He called for an Islamic currency and an Islamic United Nations, and declared a jihad to recapture Jerusalem. But things went too far when the Iranian ambassador was invited to visit Sincan, a suburb of the capital Ankara, and told an assembled crowd: 'Do not be afraid to call yourself fundamentalists! God has promised them the final victory!'

The following day tanks rolled into Sincan and Erbakan was made to affirm his support for secularism. Within months, as his power grew increasingly notional, Erbakan quit office and his Welfare Party was outlawed. One of the members of the Welfare Party was Erdogan, who as an Islamic firebrand in the Nineties had announced: 'You cannot be secular and a Muslim at the same time. The Muslim world is waiting for Turkey to rise up. We will rise up! With Allah's permission, the rebellion will start!'

After a spell in prison for inciting religious hatred, Erdogan emerged an apparently reformed character, a moderate and a moderniser with respect for Turkey's secularist path. He founded the AKP, which gained the largest share of votes in the 2002 general election. Yet many Turks doubt the authenticity of Erdogan's new-found moderation. They cite his failed bid to criminalise adultery, and his attempts to introduce 'alcohol-free zones'. It was the nomination of Gul for president, however - which would have meant that the prime minister, president and parliamentary speaker (the three most prominent positions in Turkish politics) were all AKP Islamists - that proved the last straw for the military.

Last month a notice was posted on the military general staff's website stating that the armed forces were ready once more to intervene. Erdogan described the message as 'a shot fired at democracy'. Elsewhere the Turkish intelligentsia, never slow to coin a new politicism, labelled it the 'e-coup'. Gul's nomination was revoked and Erdogan brought forward the general election to July. The AKP are favourites to win that election but if they do so then many observers believe a fifth coup to be the probable outcome.

Such was the momentous background to the gathering at Bogazici. And the backdrop was no less

dramatic. The uni versity sits on the European slopes of the Bosphorus in the shadow of one of Mehmet the Conqueror's castles, from which he mounted the siege and fall of Byzantine Constantinople in 1453. It's also located between the two mighty bridges that link not only the separate sides of the city but also the continents of Europe and Asia.

It's customary, to the point of cliche, to cast these man-made isthmuses as a figurative as well as actual meeting point between occident and orient, tradition and modernity, Islam and secularism. But perhaps a more appropriate geographical metaphor is the northern Anatolian faultline that runs beneath the sea of Marmara, the cause of a devastating earthquake in 1999. The political ground shifts quickly and unpredictably in these parts and there is perhaps no more promising venue for Samuel Huntington's tectonic, and much disputed, clash of civilisations.

Millions of Turks have taken to the streets this month in vast demonstrations in defence of secularism. From a distance, they seemed like progressive protests against encroaching Islamification, not least because 65 per cent of the participants were women. Many Turkish women look at the limited position of women in neighbouring Iran and feel anxious that the same fate may befall Turkey.

Turks often speak of the 'bikini and the headscarf' as shorthand for the way in which the secular and the religious co-exist. Walk around Istanbul and you'll see scantily-dressed girls kissing their boyfriends, and young covered women mingle with little sign of tension. One senior female academic, who asked for anonymity, told me she would like to allow headscarf-wearing women but 'it would end my career'. If there was one thing that all the academics and writers agreed upon at Bogazici it was that the secular demonstrations were both orchestrated by and played into the reactionary hands of the military.

'You have a situation,' said Faruk Birtek, a sociology professor and a sort of benign Kemalist, 'in which the so-called Islamists are more democratic than the secularists. It's what Hegel would call a contradiction without a dialectic.' Afterwards I was told by another academic that I should not take Birtek's words at face value. 'Turks say one thing to foreigners,' he said, 'and another to themselves.'

Whether or not this is true, they do seem to delight in what, if it wasn't a Greek word, one might term paradox. Birtek, a squat man with the kind of refined English vowels that make the Queen sound common, viewed the secularist-Islamist face-off as at base a struggle between the city and town, the cosmopolitan urban centres and the provincial population that have dramatically swollen the big cities in recent years. It reminded me of something Pamuk had written in Istanbul: '. . .the elite's tolerance of the military was rooted in the fear that, one day, the lower classes would combine forces with the new rich pouring from the provinces to abolish the Westernised bourgeois way of life under the banner of religion'.

Pamuk himself remained slightly aloof from the cut-and-thrust of debate at Bogazici, wearing a smile that appeared half-ironic, half-inscrutable. When the AKP first came to power, he was sceptical about their true motives. 'You make an aesthetic choice,' he told the New Yorker , 'and my choice is to find a place that is equally detached from the cruelties of political Islam.' But in the intervening years the AKP has arguably shifted closer to Pamuk, while elements within the military and some parts of the media have come to see their country's first winner of the Nobel prize for literature as an enemy target.

In a now infamous interview with a Swiss magazine, Pamuk said in 2005: 'Thirty thousand Kurds and a million Armenians were killed in these lands and nobody dares talk about it.' After a co-ordinated hate campaign and a lengthy legal procedure, under the terms of Article 301, charges against Pamuk were eventually dropped. But this was his first public outing in Turkey since the murder of Dink, and he now spends most of his time living abroad. With the Armenian dead, the dubious honour of being the ultra-nationalist's prime intellectual hate figure passed to the novelist, a cerebral man who seems ill-suited to the role of political hero, much less martyr. At the party, standing apart from the crowd, was a group of men in dark suits and pink ties. These were Pamuk's state-appointed security guards. The price of the protection is thought to be Pamuk's silence, though it's known that the novelist is keen to return to the job of writing without the distraction of being a freedom of speech figurehead.

Nor was Pamuk the only writer present who warranted protection. I spoke with Oral Calislar, a columnist

with the newspaper Cumhuriyet . Calislar had also placed his life in danger by speaking out about the Armenian question. A veteran of Turkish prisons, which have well-earned their poor reputation, he was concerned that the threat to freedom of speech, and the looming prospect of a coup, had seriously undermined the country's chance of joining the EU.

Negotiations for Turkey's accession to the EU officially began in 2005. But Nicolas Sarkozy, the new French president, is far from the only European opposed to Turkish membership. Turkey's most vocal supporter was Tony Blair, and his depar ture is probably regretted more in Istanbul than it is London. 'If Europe turns its back on us,' said Calislar, 'we could end up like Algeria. The Islamists might say they tried the democratic way and were rejected, so they could turn to other means.'

This seemed a particularly bleak vision and not one that was shared by most Turks I spoke to. With a population of 70 million and an economy that is fast expanding, Turkey is a market of huge potential. Most seemed to believe that in the long run the economic attraction will outweigh concerns about the political and cultural differences. They were instead worried that negative European responses might be exploited by nationalists to create a more pessimist and intolerant atmosphere, drawing out that 'huzun', perhaps, that lurks beneath the bustling streets of Istanbul. On these matters and many others, the writers and academics continued to hold forth as Pamuk bade his polite farewell and headed off with his guards, bound, as it would turn out, for the film jury at Cannes.

The following day I had lunch on the Asian shore of the city with a businessman named Samim Uygun. A former footballer with Galatasaray, one of Istanbul's three major football clubs, Uygun ran a private discussion club for nationalist army officers, politicians and businessmen called the Guven Hareketi (Trust Movement). 'We know who are with us and we know who are against us,' he told me in the tone of voice which suggested that being against them was not an advisable position.

A fastidious looking man, who is just old enough to have shared a football pitch with Sir Stanley Matthews, Uygun was reminiscent of a type often seen in Latin American countries: an upstanding citizen with an unshakeable belief in jackboot wisdom. 'We have one insurance,' he told me. 'This insurance is the military.'

You hear a lot about the 'deep state' or ' derin devlet ' in Turkey, the shadowy network thought to carry out, or at least order, assassinations and other dark deeds. Every now and again the Turkish public gains a glimpse of this almost mythical entity. The most celebrated example was a car crash in the town of Susurluk in 1996. The car contained a gallery of characters that seemed to have been plagiarised from a Hollywood film noir: a high-ranking police chief, a fugitive gangster who was an assassin for the state as well as a heroin dealer, his beauty queen girlfriend, and the only survivor of the crash, an MP and wealthy Kurdish clan leader.

Also found in the car was a wealth of incriminating documentation, fake diplomatic passports, money and weapons. The MP, who had made millions from a protection racket during the war with the Kurdish PKK guerrillas, claimed, not entirely plausibly, to have lost his memory after the crash. Some minor figures were charged but the main outcome of the scandal was the undeniable exposure of the state's dirty works.

With his fond football memories and avuncular manner, Uygun seemed an unlikely participant in the deep state, but one got the impression that he may well have been connected to people who were. Our conversation ranged over various issues. He told me that Dink's murder, while sad, was 'not important'. He outlined the threat to Turkish development presented by foreign investment. But he seemed to recoil when I mentioned Pamuk's name.

'I tried to read one of his books,' he said with a vinegary expression of distaste, 'but after 10, 15 pages I couldn't understand it. My wife is an educated woman and she couldn't understand it either.' Pamuk's problematic prose appeared to confirm his undesirable status in Uygun's mind. He contested the idea that Pamuk had exercised his right to freedom of speech in mentioning the Armenian deaths. And claimed instead that Pamuk was working for others. 'It's all just a game,' he explained. But on behalf of whom was Pamuk working? Uygun paused for dramatic effect, then reached for every third-rate conspiracy theorist's

favourite culprit. ‘The Jewish community in the United States. They want to bring Turkey to her knees.’

From there it did not take long before he revealed that the Iraq war was all part of an Israeli plan to expand its borders across the Middle East. ‘Almost 30,000 Jews are living north of Baku,’ he claimed. ‘And the two ribbons on the flag of Israel, we believe they represent the Mediterranean and the Caspian Sea.’

Uygun was keen for Turkey to invade Kurdistan in northern Iraq. ‘We have a score to settle with the Kurds,’ he said. The strange thing about his cranky opinions was the striking resemblance they bore to the most paranoid rantings of Islamists. Ataturk was an avowed atheist but some of those who invoke his name with a kind of religious zeal are themselves pious Muslims. Like Dink’s young killer, Uygun is an observant Muslim, the designation of Islamic nationalist being only one of the oxymoronic categories in which Turkey seems to specialise.

Yet far more than he disliked Dink or Pamuk, Uygun hated the AKP. ‘They want to change the Republic into a religious state,’ he said. ‘He [by which I took Erdogan] wanted to declare himself as Caliph. But you saw the reactions of the people.’

Many Turks feel divided loyalties between eastern tradition and western modernity. Uygun, though, seemed positively twisted by the opposing forces. His feelings about what he called the ‘Christian’ west sprang from the same well of envy and grievance from which the Islamic fundamentalists drew much of their bitter inspiration, while his craving for modernity was founded on an old-fashioned belief in the civilising benefits of a secular Republic. When it came down to it, the organiser of the Trust Movement did not trust political Islam, fearing it would drag the nation down to its peasant roots, and he did not trust democratic freedom because of the challenge it posed to the status quo.

In one matter, however, Uygun was undoubtedly correct. The people had reacted. The millions of Turks who took to the streets of Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir could not be ignored. It’s true that many of them chanted, and held banners that read, ‘No to a coup, no to sharia’, but it’s equally true that they were in many cases encouraged on to the streets by associations that, like Uygun’s, were neither unsympathetic to the army nor the prospect of a coup.

Many secular and religious Turks believe that the AKP is practising ‘tak kiye’, the religiously sanctioned practice of dissembling to gain advantage for the Islamic cause. But as Andrew Finkel, one of the most respected Turkey observers, said to me: ‘If they’re pretending to be democratic, then they are half way there. Because many parties in Turkey don’t even bother pretending to be democrats.’ Uygun saw himself on the centre right, which set the imagination racing over what a member of Turkish far right might sound like. He said that the key objective of his Trust Movement was to help unite the left and right parties into a single nationalist party to fight the AKP. And there are signs that, as in Britain and other parts of Europe, the anti-American right and the anti-American left are coming together in Turkey. Nonetheless Uygun suggested that if, as seems most likely, the AKP were victorious in the July elections, there would be trouble. ‘The army made a big commitment. . . if the AKP don’t take a lesson from it, then they have to bear the consequences.’

Not far along the Asian shore from Uygun, but a long way towards the other end of political spectrum, Sanar Yurdatapan runs the Antenna human rights organisation from his cramped apartment. Dressed in a red-capped sleeve top and blue jeans, his long greying hair tied back in a hipster’s bun, the former musician makes for a striking sartorial contrast to the starched formality of Uygun.

As youthful assistants packed envelopes, Yurdatapan told me about an incident that took place last year in Semdinli, a small town in the south-east of Turkey. Someone threw a bomb at a book store and was later caught in a military car. ‘But the chief of the army said “I know that guy, he’s a good guy” and he was protected. The prosecutor who tried to bring the case cannot find work even as a lawyer today. And the chief of the army was promoted to chief of staff. All of this happened before our eyes. It is really clear now, nothing is hidden any more.’

He said in the current climate it was still possible that Pamuk might be killed, and spoke of the writer

having been ’silenced’. He called on all Turks to stand up and fight for their democratic rights, rejecting the idea that the nation should look to Europe to secure them. ‘We should not discuss freedom of expression as a European concept,’ he insisted. ‘It’s something we need regardless of membership.’

Though Erdogan told the International Press Institute on the same day that he was prepared to revise Article 301, Yurdatapan felt that the AKP was in no hurry to give up the powers the penal code afforded. ‘Their brain is not different to that of the others. When they rule they think they need those articles, but when they are used against them they shout out.’

He also warned about another law, Article 305, that as yet has not been employed. According to this provision, any person, regardless of their nationality, who writes from abroad about the Turkish state in a critical fashion, and for personal benefit, is liable to 3-5 years imprisonment. ‘They gave two examples of criticisms: if you say the Turkish army must leave Cyprus or you use the word genocide. I’m not making money from what you write, but you are,’ then bursting into laughter, he added. ‘You are in danger!’

‘But it’s not a joke, really,’ he said, composing himself. ‘This is the law!’

The ferry back across the Bosphorus was forced to negotiate its way through a flotilla of massive tankers passing to and from the Black Sea, and the tankers themselves had little room to manœuvre in the narrow strait. It was a bit like finding a workable path through the complex and sometimes lethal cross-currents of Turkish politics.

For the last time, I admired the dome-and-minaret majesty of the Istanbul skyline. Seldom have history and geography come together with such splendid results. There were signs too of rejuvenation and a new confidence. As the New York Times style section recently put it: ‘Istanbul is now the rare place where readers of Archaeology and Wallpaper* magazines can clink glasses with equal zeal.’

But a bristling sensitivity remains, the useless inheritance of imperial decline. You could call it a collective melancholy or ‘huzun’, but what seems certain is that if Turkey wants to seize hold of the future, the state needs to loosen its suffocating stranglehold on the past.

Sources

Source : The Observer, May 20 2007