

Turkey's Berlin Wall is cracking down (1)

Friday 18 June 2010, by [Yonca Poyraz Doğan](#)

Veteran Journalist Hasan Cemal, whose most recent book, “Türkiye'nin Asker Sorunu” (Turkey's Military Problem), hit the shelves last week, has said that there is a serious struggle for democracy and the rule of law, a struggle for change and a struggle between old and new in Turkey, leading to cracks in its foundations.

“The status quo forces do resist. Where and how do they do that? Look at the high judiciary. Both the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors [HSYK] are products of the Sept. 12 military coup. As [Kenan] Evren put it, this is a regime that aims at keeping alive its own bureaucratic oligarchy. Now this system has cracked from its foundations,” he said in the second part of our Monday Talk interview.

“Turkey's Berlin Wall has been hit in various places, it has even been shaken and started to fall down. Knowingly or unknowingly, the European and American press cannot put the pieces of the puzzle together. Prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the Western and American press had a better understanding of the democratic struggle that the dissidents put up against the authoritarian regime. Why don't they want to understand this in Turkey?” he asked.

Elaborating on military-civilian relations in Turkey, Cemal answered our questions.

When it comes to military-civilian relations, you give a lot of credit to the Ergenekon investigation, but there are people who say it is nonsense. There is, for example, Gareth Jenkins, who argues in that direction in addition to some Turkish observers. What do you say about them?

The status quo forces are trying to protect themselves in Turkey. There is the military, there is the bureaucratic oligarchy. People who are against a first-class democracy and state of law in Turkey are trying to protect themselves. I would say that if anybody would like to get an idea about this, they should read Özden Örnek's diary. I would have translated it into English and some other major languages and told them to read it.

Would that be enough?

If they read it, and if they still question Ergenekon, I don't have anything to tell them. We can't stop people from saying things within the context of freedom of speech in a democracy. But they should also have a look at the recent history of Turkey, like the May 27 [1960], March 12, 1971 and Sept. 12, 1980 coups and the Feb. 28 [1997] process. Then they can start reading Örnek's diary and [Mustafa] Balbay's diary. They will see schemes against the [Justice and Development Party] AK Party government, which came to power with 35 percent of the vote. Those schemes continued up until 2009, when there was the Cage plan in March and the action plan to finish off the AK Party and the [Fethullah] Gülen movement. The murders of Hrant Dink, Father Santoro and the Malatya massacre have been qualified as “operations” in the Cage plan. What are these operations? Operations that are planned to imply that there is a surge in reactionaryism. If there are still people who say that all of this is false and specially produced information, then I have nothing else to say.

That's what I was going to ask.

If all of these were special fabrications, then we wouldn't even have the “T” of the Taraf daily, they would have razed Taraf to the ground. As the chief of General Staff put it, if some of the documents were just a “piece of paper,” we would not see Taraf anywhere today. Considering the recent past of Turkish political

history, nobody should try to water down the Ergenekon trial because that would not be convincing.

I should also say that there is justifiable criticism because of absurdities in the Ergenekon trial as far as the judicial processes have been concerned, and as in the examples of Balbay and [Tuncay] Özkan, the detention periods have been transformed into punishment. But just because of those examples, nobody should underestimate the importance of that trial. The Ergenekon process and trial are significant because the activities of supporting juntas and coups have been put on trial for the first time in Turkey, and it shows that people who say “Hey military, don’t mess with politics” have been right. I can no longer stand elaborations in Turkey related to Turkish politics in the foreign press, like this is what The Post said or that is what The Times said. That era is over. We are the ones who live in this country, and we see what is happening from the inside out. There was an article in The Wall Street Journal in which Bernard Lewis said something, and others said something else, which emphasized a scenario that Turkey will be like Iran in 10 years. Comparing Iran and Turkey is an effort that would either consciously serve the interests of the coup supporters, or it is an unconscious act.

Why do you think that way?

Turkey’s political, social and economic development and past are not comparable to Iran. We see that the number of people who wear headscarves has increased and therefore we say that Turkey will become like Iran. This viewpoint undermines the intelligence of Turkish people. I’m angry at that. These are products of some neocon supporters. The views of those people are news and they should, of course, be given, but I don’t attach importance to them. Has the role that the military played in coups in Turkey opened the way for democracy or not? Has the role that the military played made the Kurdish problem better or worse? Has the role played by the military made polarization worse in the country or not? The headscarf issue has become a tool in dividing the country. When you are against every sign of religiousness and take the understanding of secularism to the extreme, then you are bound to have radicalism and polarization in Turkey.

‘Prime minister casts too great a shadow over the press’

You write in your book that on the morning of April 28, 2007, the Turkish press, which had given the military’s memorandum big headlines, did not have any signs reminiscent of El Pais. With that you recall the opposition of El Pais to the military and which threatened the military in Feb. 1981 in Spain. If there is a memorandum again in Turkey, how do you think the Turkish press would react ?

It would have a much more democratic attitude. The reaction would be more democratic in both individual columnists and newspapers. A lot of newspapers would have the headline “Hey military, don’t mess with politics.” Compared to 2007, more commentators would speak up on television and present a democratic attitude.

If the military comes under civilian rule, can we call this a complete democracy? Would civilianization mean democratization?

We should always take this into consideration: You can establish a civilian structure, in which [Prime Minister Recep] Tayyip Erdoğan comes with the support of the military, and he might have been elected, but he could end press freedom. I believe Erdoğan has too great a shadow over the press. I criticize Erdoğan, evaluating him from the viewpoint of democracy. And I see that he has authoritarian tendencies that come with the power he has as a single-party government. This is important. Still, his pluses are more than his minuses, but his shadow over the press is too great.

A Wall Street Journal news article was saying recently that there is a bloodless civil war in Turkey. Do you agree with this evaluation?

Bloody or bloodless civil war is not pleasant. In Turkey, there is a serious struggle for democracy and the

rule of law. It is, in a way, a struggle for change, a struggle between old and new. The status quo forces do resist. Where and how do they do that? Look at the high judiciary. Both the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors [HSYK] are products of the Sept. 12 military coup. As [Kenan] Evren put it, this is a regime that aims at keeping its own bureaucratic oligarchy alive. Now this system has cracked from its foundations. Turkey's Berlin Wall has been hit in various places, it has even been shaken and has started to fall down. Knowingly or unknowingly, the European and American press cannot put the pieces of the puzzle together. Prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the Western and American press had a better understanding of the democratic struggle that the dissidents waged against the authoritarian regime. Why don't they want to understand this in Turkey?

Why?

Islamophobia, prejudices related to Islam play a big role here. In Turkey, they see that people who come from an Islamic political background are in power through elections. Is the struggle that they are engaged in a struggle to bring down the wall that obstructs the way of democracy, or are they trying to make Turkey like Iran? Are they going to put forward their secret agendas following the fall of the wall, and is this why they are trying to change the structure of the high judiciary? Since their minds are busy with those questions, they can't see the realities. Those who do that intentionally and in a sneaky way come from the circles that dislike Turkey's foreign policies related to the Middle East and Israel. They comprise some of the Israeli lobby and neocons, remnants of the [George W.] Bush regime and their tentacles in Turkey. They systematically disseminate the information that Turkey will be like Iran and that what is going on is not a struggle for democracy and law. This is in a way a product of [Erdoğan's] "one-minute" outburst [in Davos]. These circles are also under the influence of Kemalism. If there is no military in Turkey, they say there won't be democracy, and Turkey would be divided and there would be Islamic fundamentalism. ... Indeed the neocons and some Israeli lobbies do not give a damn if there is a first-class democracy or not in Turkey or if Turkey enters the European Union — because a first-class democracy in Turkey makes the country a regional actor, and then Turkey wouldn't care what Israel says, even what the European Union says.

'Prime minister needs to do some delicate balancing'

What do you think about Turkey's relations with Iran? Is Turkey over-engaged with Iran?

Turkey tried to have good relations with Iran even during the time of Khomeini and in spite of Khomeini. Turkey's policies toward Iran are generally good, but they need some balancing. Relations are good with Syria, too; it is going well. Even when Apo [Abdullah Öcalan] was in Syria, Turkey had good relations with Syria. In 1987, when Apo was there, then Prime Minister [Turgut] Özal went to Syria; in 1991-92 then-Prime Minister [Süleyman] Demirel went there. Turkey did not sever its relations with Syria. The government's policy to have relations with Hamas is also a correct policy. That is the line which the United States is taking and at which Europe has arrived. Some articles in the foreign press about Turkey are due to Turkey's increased weight. The West has to put away its Cold War spectacles. There is [in Turkey] also an attitude that shows too much concern as in "Oops, the prime minister said 'one minute'! What is the United States going to do, what is the Israel lobby going to do?" Why do we care? They can do whatever they want to do. However, the prime minister needs to do some delicate balancing regarding Iran and Israel. He has some harsh words. But this also has a direct influence on the man in the street in the Islamic world because television channels like Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera transmit messages.

There is also a part of society in Turkey that is at a distance from the power struggles, not against the headscarf, not radical Kemalists, and they genuinely fear that their lifestyles might be threatened. Aren't there things the government can do to address those fears?

These are genuine fears. There are uneasy feelings. And there are things that the government needs to do. Therefore, the government needs to open up to the outside world. There need to be some gestures. There are things that seem as though the government's only criterion for appointments is to have officials whose

wives wear headscarves. Is this intentional? Aren't there people who can do the same job in Turkey even if their wives are not covered?

What about the United States and Turkey?

Turkey is a country with a population of around 70 million, and the further it takes its democracy and the rule of law, it will grow economically, and its area of political influence would grow, too. It would attract investments from various places, be it Russia, Arab countries or the Gulf. Without doubt, Turkey should not exclude Israel, and it should have good relations with the United States, and it should continue its way on the European Union path. But when Israel continues to have inhuman policies in Gaza and does not change its policies on Palestine, Turkey would be right to criticize it. Because as long as Israel continues to have those policies, it will make the world unstable; it will lead to the growth of radical Islam. Therefore, the United States, Europe - - and some countries already do that - - should pressure Israel to change its policies. Barack Obama has started doing it as well.

... To be continued

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Hasan Cemal

He was one of the editors of the intellectually influential political weekly Devrim, published in Ankara. He also worked for the political weeklies Yeni Ortam and Toplum and for the ANKA News Agency, all based in Ankara. He joined the Cumhuriyet daily, published in İstanbul, in 1973 and became its Ankara representative and bureau chief in 1979 before being appointed editor-in-chief in 1981. For 11 years, he held this position. Cemal also became chief editorial writer of the daily. He was a senior columnist at the Sabah daily between April 1992 and November 1998. Cemal has been a senior columnist for the Milliyet daily since November 1998. He is the author of seven books in Turkish, including: “Tank Sesiyle Uyanmak” (Waking Up to the Sound of Tanks); “Demokrasi Korkusu” (The Fear of Democracy) and “Kimse Kızmasın Kendimi Yazdım” (Nobody Should be Angry, I Wrote About Myself — An Autobiography).

Sources

Source : TdZ, 18 May 2010, Tuesday