



Post-Kemalism and the Future of Turkish Governance

TURKEY PROGRAMME

Nicholas DANFORTH

Non-Resident Senior Research Fellow, Turkey Programme



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HELLENIC FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN & FOREIGN POLICY (ELIAMEP)

49, Vasilissis Sofias Ave., 10676, Athens, Greece

Tel.: +30 210 7257 110 | Fax: +30 210 7257 114 | www.eliamep.gr | eliamep@eliamep.gr

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Summary

- Disillusionment with Erdoğan and the AKP after 2013 has reshaped the study of Turkish politics and history, leading scholars to focus on new themes and new periods.
- Comparative approaches, political economy and a newfound interest in the Cold War have offered a more nuanced understanding of Turkish authoritarianism.
- Post-Kemalism remain more popular in the U.S. and Europe than in Turkey.

The Limits and Lacunae of Post-Kemalism

ELIMED's October 24 webinar began with a candid discussion about the stakes of the post-Kemalism debate, focused on the interplay of political dynamics and personal experiences that drew many of us into it.

İlker Aytürk, who co-edited the recent volume *Post-Post-Kemalizm* with Berk Esen, explained that in the late 2000s he became "increasingly frustrated with the way Erdoğan was being analyzed and studied." As a visiting scholar in the United States between 2011 and 2012, he watched as his colleagues ignored the red flags about Erdoğan's autocratic behavior and continued to shower him with praise for democratizing Turkey. The sense of isolation this created only changed with the 2013 Gezi Park protests, at which point, "people who were scolding me for criticizing Erdoğan then became greater critics."

Cangül Örnek also began on a personal note, saying that as a graduate student her classmates were all interested in studying the early Republican era and critiquing Kemalism. They were not interested in developments during the subsequent decades, because they "did not think Turkey had changed a lot after the 1930s." In keeping with the widespread mood in academia at the time, they believed that "Turkey was somehow frozen in the 1930s and Turkish society revolves around the problems created by the Kemalist elite."

Historians will readily admit that history is political. As Aytürk put it, "Academia responds to political challenges" and "academic paradigms are driven by the political exigencies of the moment." The current critique of post-Kemalism, then, focuses on the relationship between the way Turkish history was understood in recent decades and the support that Erdoğan received from many academics during this same period.

In her opening presentation, Örnek identified a number of ways that the scholarly focus on the early Republican period at the expense of later periods, particularly the Cold War, contributed to undue optimism about Erdoğan's democratizing potential. She argued that the "core argument of post Kemalism" was that "the decisive conflict in Turkey is the one between the state and 'the rest.'" Yet post-Kemalists assumed the state to be an independent actor which was "isolated from society." This, in turn "led them to read Turkish history as the unfolding of the will of the Kemalist state" and conclude that "the solution was reducing the sphere of influence of the state – thus making democratization easy." While the state was treated as monolithic, "society was portrayed as a combination of different groups actors," which, post-Kemalists assumed, "were in equal distance from the state" and thus "shared a common interest in being opponents of the strong state."

But this perspective "trivialized antagonisms" between different social groups, who did not in fact share the same relationship with the state. "Think of Islamists," Örnek asked: "Were they really equally excluded from the state as the Turkish Left? I think we can confidently say no." Similarly, as for the business community, "Did they receive the same treatment from the state that the working class received?"

In short, academics operating within the post-Kemalist paradigm tended to view the Kemalist state as having been consistently opposed to religious conservatives and the business community. However, a greater historiographic focus on the Cold War era, as well as a greater methodological focus on political economy, helped reveal the extent to which these groups had often worked together in opposition to Left-wing actors. This why some of the early critics of post-Kemalism emerged from the Left, among scholars who "did not neglect the capitalist character of the state." Thus, Örnek concluded, only by appreciating phenomena such as "anti-Americanism, Islamization

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and anti-Communism” which emerged in the second half of the 20th century was it possible to understand the political dynamics behind Erdoğan’s consolidation of power.

New Circumstances, New Directions

The conversation then shifted to how scholarship was adapting as attitudes toward Erdoğan and the AKP became decidedly more negative following the Gezi Park protests. Both Berk Esen and Alp Yenen stressed that where post-Kemalist scholarship often implied there was something *sui generis* about Turkey’s experience, more recent scholarship has better integrated Turkey into global trends. Yenen noted a shifted toward “more global and comparative and connected histories,” while Esen said that in addition to “new methods” and “new archival sources,” there was also an increase in comparative work looking at Turkey in relation to other, similar cases.

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Aytürk emphasized a number of new themes that were now receiving greater attention and were making important contributions. First, he emphasized that recent scholarship on Turkey and the rise of the AKP was addressing the political economy of populism, thereby contributing to a larger global debate about populism itself. Second, there was a newfound interest in analyzing contemporary Turkish politics from the perspective of competitive authoritarianism, again putting the country’s recent experience in conversation with a number of other countries’. Third, he identified a “rediscovery” of *laïcité* in scholarship, as well as a greater appreciation for its value. Finally, there was newfound interest in the post-1945 period, which was being treated as a “serious subject of study” for the first time. This, Aytürk argued, was the most important development, particularly as Turkish citizens were “surrounded by a political elite who grew up during the Cold War years.”

Örnek, too, stressed how moving beyond the post-Kemalist paradigm and focusing more on the Cold War period facilitated seeing Turkey in a global context, while also bringing new themes to the fore. She noted that post-Kemalism “tended to analyze Turkey in terms of its differences... especially from Europe.” Turkey was a unique case that could be best explained with reference to itself. Ironically, in this regard, “the Kemalist interpretation of Turkey was shared by post-Kemalism as well.”

Moving beyond the post-Kemalist paradigm, Örnek argued, led to a newfound interest in the origins of Islamism in the 1970s and 1980s. There is now more attention being paid to “the interaction between the state, particularly the military, and Islamist groups” and a recognition that the military and Islamists were “partners as well as enemies.” The result was a newfound tendency to view Islamist movements in Turkey as a part of a “global phenomena,” influenced by factors such as Saudi Arabia, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian revolution.

Aytürk then discussed the way some post-Kemalist scholars have tried to “make a comeback” with what he described as the “green Kemalism argument.” This perspective draws an “overarching line that connects Mustafa Kemal to Erdoğan,” thereby ignoring intellectual and ideological differences between different eras and movements in order to “make Kemalism the ur-authoritarianism in Turkey.”

Esen too pointed to the way advocates of post-Kemalism were trying “to shift their thesis onto a continuity argument,” in which contemporary Turkish authoritarianism could still be traced back to the early Republic. In contrast to this approach, however, Esen identified an encouraging trend toward seeking “alternative sources of authoritarianism” in Turkish history, including “Islamic political culture, the Cold War, the Ottoman legacy, cultural politics, anti-Alevi and anti-Kurdish tendencies, [and] political institutions.”

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On the subject of what post-Kemalist insights would and should prove lasting, Yenen stressed that changes “in the area of minority studies, nationalism studies and genocide scholarship” were “here to stay and for very good reason.” He argued that the breakthroughs made in scholarship on the Armenian genocide were particularly important. Yenen then referenced Yektan Türkyılmaz’s claim that there is now “a new generation of intellectuals who are committed to the ideals of the Republic but still recognize the violence it was accompanied by.”

The Politics of Post-Post-Kemalism

The conversation concluded with a discussion of how future political developments, particularly the 2023 Turkish elections, would shape the evolution of scholarship on Turkey, as well as the impact of different political circumstances on scholars working inside and outside of the country.

Aytürk explained that he did not see post-post-Kemalism as a paradigm, but rather as a response to the dominant paradigm. “I would hate to see Turkish studies reduced once again to a hegemonic paradigm,” he said, but would rather see an era “in which different approaches will appear.” Ideally, he added, there would be room for class-based approaches, and even neo-nationalist and neo-Kemalist ones.

Yenen added that it was important to avoid the impression that post-post-Kemalism was “just a Trojan horse for bringing Kemalism back in.” Unfortunately, he argued, both Kemalism and post-Kemalism became “mirror images of each other,” an inversion reminiscent of the “Bizarro Jerry” episode of Seinfeld.

Aytürk predicted that the post-post-Kemalism argument was unlikely to make inroads into Turkish studies outside Turkey because academics in the U.S. and Europe were responding to different political realities. Here, he argued, his colleagues studying the Islamic world felt they had “a responsibility to defend this community against a sea of Westerners who have no understanding of it, and this makes them very reluctant to hear from scholars based in Turkey that there are things wrong there.” As a result, Turkey studies was likely to split: scholarship in Turkey would become more post-post-Kemalist, while outside “post-Kemalism will have a new lease on life” and “become a diaspora phenomenon.” Yenen took a more optimistic perspective, suggesting that European and American academia would eventually follow the trail blazed by scholars in Turkey, with young scholars who are going abroad playing a “key role.”

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Örnek predicted that an ongoing reassessment of laicism was likely in response to the AKP’s policies. “For all the criticism,” she argued, “we see how laicism is of critical importance for the life of many sectors of society today, including the working class, women, the LGBT community, and women with headscarves.” Women in particular had come to recognize the “anti-secularism of the AKP” as a threat, even as a matter of life and death. This was already prompting a reaction in Turkish society which, she concluded, would be reflected in Turkish studies over the coming years.

Esen, in turn, believed that post-Kemalism would remain in the diaspora, but that “we will witness some major changes, especially if the opposition wins in the 2023 elections.”

In Turkey, he pointed out, “the young generation is more urban, more educated and more secular on average.” Moreover, “many of the cultural battles that fractured Turkey in the 1990s have been resolved, not by politicians but on practical grounds.” Thus, “members of the old generation may cling to cultural politics and old vendettas, but even there things are changing.” “If CHP is already changing course,” Esen argued, “it will be impossible to bring back old Kemalist ideas.”

Hopefully this will lead to “a new generation of politicians that will cater to bread-and-butter issues and the economic concerns of the voters.” In this context, there would be “a more positive assessment of the Turkish Republic,” without anyone “really trying to push for restoration of the Kemalist paradigm.” There were, however, a number of Kemalist ideas that might nonetheless win greater appreciation in the future, including “secularism, impersonal bipartisan political institutions to overcome patrimonial politics, and a peaceful foreign policy.”

In the diaspora, Esen suggested, “as more countries face right wing populist movements that come to power through democratic means,” the comparisons to the Turkish experience might become more apparent. Much as “Kemalism has come under significant challenges, many other secular developmentalist nationalist regimes from the first half of the century have also faced challenges” including the rise of the BJP at the expense of the Congress Party in India and the rise of Likud at the expense of the Labor Party in Israel.

At the same time, Esen identified the potential for significant continuity in post-Kemalist perspectives, even if the opposition were to win in 2023. Scholars focused on particular topics like the migration crisis, the Kurdish issue or the Armenian genocide might be unlikely to change their position if the opposition did not dramatically break with the policies of past governments. “As a result,” he concluded “even after a political change, even after a democratizing movement, they will still maintain their critical view.”

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