

A Weak State with a 'Strong State' Tradition: The Case of Turkey

Written by Begum Burak

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

A Weak State with a 'Strong State' Tradition: The Case of Turkey

<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/08/08/a-weak-state-with-a-strong-state-tradition-the-case-of-turkey/>

BEGUM BURAK, AUG 8 2012

Since the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the Turkish state has been characterized by a relatively weak civil society and a 'strong state tradition'. Many of the founding elites of Turkey, among whom Mustafa Kemal Atatürk had been the leader, were military officers and they preferred to eliminate almost all things belonging to the past which they evaluated as backward and archaic. They closed down the religious brotherhoods and labeled them as a threat to state authority and social unity. They saw the state as a supreme entity and treated society and societal organizations as entities belonging to secondary status.[1]

According to Metin Heper, Turkey has a strong state tradition, according to which state elites and state institutions have a dominant role.[2] By contrast, the non-state units such as civil society organizations and some of the economic actors that do not have their roots in state-led structures have typically been weak and passive players.

The central argument of this article is that, despite the fact that the Turkish state used to have supreme authority over non-state actors – such as civil society associations or trade unions – the legitimacy of the modern Turkish state's claim to such power status is increasingly being questioned. Here, I refer to the depth of legitimacy of state policies and state discourses by using the term 'state power'. A state's economic and military capabilities arguably define how powerful a state is. Beside this, the nature of the relationship between the state and society plays a key role in determining how strong a state is. In short, unless a state is viewed as legitimate by its own citizens, the power of that state inevitably becomes questionable.

The weakness of civil society in Turkey and state elites' distrust towards non-state actors can be traced back to Ottoman times. With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish Republic came into-being, and the Republic inherited some particular state practices and characteristics from its predecessor such as state supremacy over civil organizations, and the predominance of authoritarian characteristics rather than democratic ones in political life.

While some see the emergence of civil society against the strong statist discourse as the ultimate step in the consolidation of democracy in Turkey, the necessary connection between civil society and the state actors through political channels has been widely ignored.[3] The impact of the Ottoman Empire upon the nature of civil society in Turkey is also part of the explanation. As Sinem Gürbey argues:

The Turkish Republic inherited a strong bureaucratic state from the Ottoman Empire... The Ottomans were convinced that the only way to maintain an ethnically, religiously and linguistically heterogeneous empire was through empowering the state apparatus and repressing groups that could potentially challenge their power. The Ottoman preoccupation with concentrating power in the hands of the ruling elite in order to maintain several distinct groups together under a single state, coupled with lack of intermediate bodies, led to the emergence of a center-periphery cleavage along cultural lines.[4]

Not just in Ottoman times, but also the political history of modern Turkey, especially the early Republican era, presents a clear picture of the basic features of state-society relations. It is not hard to argue that the nation-building process in the early Republican years can be explained as an elite project which treated the people as "ignorant

A Weak State with a 'Strong State' Tradition: The Case of Turkey

Written by Begum Burak

masses" who needed the guide of the elites.[5] In parallel to that, the official state ideology, named Kemalism – which Mehmet Altan defined as the "ideology of the barrack" – usually tried to homogenize and standardize the masses within the borders the state elites defined themselves.[6]

This brief overview of the state's formation and the worldview of the Kemalist state elites reveal an important dimension for analyzing the nature of the Turkish state. Historical tradition is one of the main causes for the state's priority over civil society in modern Turkey.[7]

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that there is a tradition of demonization of political opposition in Turkey. This tradition has been reproduced through bureaucratic centralization, reinforced by a philosophy of social control espoused by Turkey's traditional bureaucratic classes. According to this mentality, "the society should be governed; it is the state which will do it, and it is the bureaucrat who will represent the state." [8]

Until the mid-1980s, Turkey used to be an inward-oriented state that had statist economic policies and weak non-state units. With the end of the military regime in 1983, the Turgut Ozal rule (1983-1993), Turkey began taking steps towards political and economic liberalization. However, despite Turkey's progress in areas like adopting a free-market economy, state-society relations still plague its development. With the European Union accession process, Turkey has realized a considerable amount of progress in terms of democracy, rule of law and human rights. However, it still has a long way to go.

Turkey today is more democratic and more liberal than in past decades. Turkish civil society is much more vibrant, and the power configuration between the political elites and the state elites is much more balanced. However, it can be argued that Turkey still cannot be defined as a strong state despite having a 'strong state tradition'.

As argued above, state elites and state institutions remain relatively authoritarian, and state discourses are seen as almost unquestionable, whereas civil society actors are relatively weak. A strong state is one that has robust civilian and political institutions, democratically-driven civil-military relations, the predominance of the rule of law and a democratic political culture. By contrast, a 'strong state tradition' refers to a state wherein state mechanisms can easily oppress the non-state units and democratic norms and procedures can easily be ignored.

Why and how is Turkey still defined as a weak state?

First of all, without a consolidated democracy and without the establishment of a strong rule of law, Turkey cannot be viewed as a strong state. Turkey has achieved a considerable degree of progress in terms of rule of law but still it has got a long way to go for a strong rule of law.[9] The main factor that hinders democratic consolidation is the 1982 Constitution, which is the product of military domination.

Secondly, Turkey still bans the rights of its own people (like the right to have an education in one's mother tongue, and the broadcasting of a state-led TV channel in Kurdish), and sees ethnic and religious diversity as a source of threat. How can we call this state a strong state?

A state stuck between the mosque and the barrack cannot be called a strong state.

—

Begum Burak is a PhD Candidate and a Research Assistant at Fatih University, Istanbul, Turkey. You can reach her pieces and academic articles on <http://fatih.academia.edu/BegumBurak> and follow her on Twitter at @BurakBegum.

[1] For top-down societal, cultural and institutional changes witnessed during the early years of the Republic, See, Walter F. Weiker, *The Modernization of Turkey: From Ataturk to the Present*

A Weak State with a 'Strong State' Tradition: The Case of Turkey

Written by Begum Burak

Day (New York and London: Holmes & Meir Publishers, Inc., 1981.

[2] Metin Heper, *The State Tradition in Turkey*, Eothen Press, 1985

[3] Sinem Gürbey, "Civil Society and Islam in Turkey", http://www.columbia.edu/cu/polisci/pdf-files/apsa_gurbey.pdf .

[4] Ibid

[5] For such a view, see Erik J. Zürcher, Turkey, *A Modern History*, I. B. Tauris, 2004

[6] Mehmet Altan, *Kent Dindarlığı* [City Piety], Timaş, 2010

[7] M. Lütfullah Karaman and B. Aras, "The Crisis of Civil Society in Turkey", <http://www.fatihun.edu.tr/~jesr/TheCrisisofCivilSocietyinTurkey.pdf>

[8] Quoted in Karaman & Aras <http://www.fatihun.edu.tr/~jesr/TheCrisisofCivilSocietyinTurkey.pdf>

[9] For a critical evaluation about Turkish democracy and the rule of law in Turkey, see <http://www.ecfr.eu/scorecard/2012/wider/44>

About the author:

Dr Begüm Burak is a political scientist based in Istanbul. Between 2010 and 2015, during her occupation as a research assistant, she got engaged in short-term academic activities in Italy, United Kingdom, Bosnia and Spain. In 2018, Dr. Burak became one of the founding members of www.ilkmade.com, a social and professional network for political scientists. Twitter: @begumburak1984