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Social Trust, Democracy, and the Kurdish Issue in Turkey

FARUK EKMEKCI

The rise of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, hereafter the AKP) in Turkey raised hopes for a genuine solution to Turkey’s century-old Kurdish issue. The AKP’s recognition of the Kurdish issue and reconciliation with Kurdish identity during its first term in office (2002–2007) attracted the hearts and minds of many Kurds and won the AKP the majority of votes in several Kurdish-majority provinces in 2007. The AKP introduced a package of reforms in 2009 (named popularly as “Kurdish opening”), which included opening a state TV channel that would broadcast solely in Kurdish. Yet the “opening” came to a halt in late 2009 and since then Turkey has rolled back to a cycle of securitization, violence, and polarization regarding the Kurdish issue, which resulted in over a thousand casualties and thousands of imprisonments. What explains this reversal in policy and Turkey’s failure to address the Kurdish issue effectively? This essay aims at providing a partial explanation to this question by elaborating on a social factor that prevents Turkey from effectively dealing with the Kurdish issue, namely low social trust.

Social trust, which refers to “trust in strangers” and is alternatively defined as “the generalized willingness of individuals to trust their fellow citizens” or “the belief that others will not deliberately or knowingly do us harm,” is one of the factors that help build stronger and effective democratic regimes. Whether and how much people within a society trust other people in that society significantly shapes social and political relations within that society. First and foremost, social trust helps develop social ties and social solidarity, which strengthen the foundations of a democratic system. In this sense, social trust is “an essential component of social capital,” as put by Robert Putnam. Societies with higher social trust are also found to have a better functioning democracy, which increases citizens’ satisfaction with the democratic system. Last but not least, William Mishler and Richard Rose’s research suggests that high social trust contributes to “citizens’ normative commitments to democratic values and their rejection of authoritarian appeals,” thereby ensuring the survival of democratic regimes.
Turkey is infamously referred to by many as a “torn country” and “divided society”—torn/divided between Islam and secularism, East and West, Alevi and Sunni, Turk and Kurd. Beyond these macro-level divisions lies a more fundamental problem at the micro level: distrust. Recent surveys reveal that Turkey is one of the countries with the lowest social trust in the world. Among the 57 countries that were included in the fifth wave of the World Values Survey (2004–2008), Turkey was the country with the second-lowest score on social (or generalized) trust after Trinidad and Tobago. The survey asked respondents “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?” Whereas the 57-country average of the percentage of people who answered “most people can be trusted” was 25.1 percent, it was only 4.8 percent in Turkey. That the percentage of Turkish people who trust other people in general was almost lowest in the world and equal to the percentage of Rwandan people (4.8 percent), attests to the nearly pathological social psychology in Turkey.

Low social trust in Turkey manifests itself as low political trust as well. A great majority of Turks do not trust politicians who do not share his/her political views. A June 2009 survey by a major Turkish polling organization (Metropoll) found that percentages of Turks who found Recep Tayyip Erdogan (the leader of the conservative AKP), Devlet Bahceli (the leader of the nationalist MHP), and Deniz Baykal (the then leader of the secular CHP) as “honest and reliable” were 58 percent, 46 percent, and 30 percent, respectively. Thus, for a great number of Turks, not only the politics, but also the “intentions” of rival politicians are wicked.

One of the major consequences of low social trust can be called “politics of intentions.” Politics of intentions is the type of politics in which actors are judged more by their presumed intentions than by their actual statements or policies. In distrustful societies, rival political parties are generally assumed to have harmful ulterior motives and consequently are viewed as “fatal threats” to the very existence and/or regime of the country. It is thus not surprising to see Turkish politicians resorting to name-calling so often, labeling one another “separatist,” “golpist,” “Sharia-lover,” “anti-Republic,” “Americanist,” and so on.

Politics of intentions has serious negative consequences; one of them is the absence or rarity of non-partisan politics. As most people and politicians in rival blocs view one another ill-intentioned, rather than ill-informed or unqualified, cooperation among political parties and non-partisan policy-making become very difficult and rare. Very often, we see Turkish political groups opposing the very initiative/bill they supported earlier, when the same initiative/bill is introduced by a rival political party. This happens not because they oppose to the content of the initiative/bill, but because they believe that
the rival party must have some ulterior reasons to introduce that initiative/bill.

Another major consequence of low social trust and resultant politics of intentions is higher popular acceptance of undemocratic rule. Widespread social distrust, to paraphrase Mishler and Rose, decreases people’s normative commitments to democratic values and increases the appeal of authoritarian rule. Because in distrustful societies rival political parties are assumed to have harmful ulterior motives, a great number of people in those societies prefer undemocratic rule by people of their ideology to democratic rule by people they find ill-intentioned and harmful. The World Values Survey provides evidence for the strong correlation between social trust and support for undemocratic rule. The survey also asked its respondents if “having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections” was a very good, fairly good, fairly bad, or very bad way of governing their country. There was a clear negative correlation ($r = -0.46$) between social trust (measured as the percentage of people in a country who think “most people can be trusted”) and support for strong leader (measured as the percentage of people in a country who replied “very good” or “fairly good” to the question on having a strong leader). In other words, lower social trust increases popular support for undemocratic rule by strong leaders.

Social approval of “strong leader” reaches to preoccupying levels in some of the most distrustful societies, one of which is Turkey. Whereas the 55-country average of support for a strong leader was 38.1 percent, it was an appalling 58.9 percent in Turkey. Because rival politicians are viewed by many as ill-intentioned, it seems that a majority of Turks prefer “benevolent despotism” to “malevolent” democratic rule. This constitutes a major setback for Turkish democratization in general and resolution of the Kurdish issue in particular.

The two negative consequences of low social trust mentioned above have direct relevance to Turkey’s Kurdish issue. First, while the resolution of the Kurdish issue requires a broad consensus among major political parties in Ankara, the dominant politics of intentions in Turkey hinders non-partisan politics and prevents political parties from reaching such a consensus. Whenever one major political party takes an important step toward responding to Kurdish demands, other major parties initiate a campaign of defamation and categorical opposition. For example, in 2009, the AKP government initiated a “Kurdish opening,” which included bold steps like opening a state TV channel that would broadcast in Kurdish, permitting a number of low-ranking PKK members to enter into Turkey without suffering legal consequences, and talking to senior PKK representatives in Oslo, Norway. The major opposition party, CHP, fiercely opposed the opening and defamed it as “separatism” and “concession.” The then leader of the CHP, Deniz Baykal, labeled the
initiative as an “AKP-DTP-PKK project” and the then deputy parliamentary group leader of the CHP, Kemal Anadol, accused the AKP of “jeopardizing national unity and integrity.”

This was in 2009. Two years later, the AKP slid more toward conservatism as it solidified its power through electoral victories as well as legal campaigns against the “deep state” (famously known as Ergenekon and Balyoz—Sledgehammer—cases) and the CHP gained a new momentum with its new leadership under Kemal Kilicdaroglu. This time it was the CHP who was making overtures toward Kurds and pro-Kurdish parties and it was the ruling AKP government crying “separatism.” The play was the same but the two major political parties had switched roles. In his elections campaign in Hakkari, which is a Kurdish-majority province in southeastern Turkey and a stronghold of the pro-Kurdish parties, in May 2011, Kilicdaroglu criticized the legal operations against Kurdish politicians and journalists and declared, albeit vaguely, his support for local autonomy. Prime Minister Erdogan labeled rapprochement between the CHP and the Kurdish political party (BDP) as a “Silivri-Kandil plot” (which translates in plain terms as “golpist-terrorist plot”) and built an unforgiving nationalist rhetoric on the absence of Turkish flags in Kilicdaroglu’s Hakkari campaign meeting.

Second, widespread social distrust in Turkey prevents popular acceptance of Kurds’ political rights by the majority Turks. Decentralization of Turkish government, in the form of federalism or regional autonomy, has long been one of the major demands of the pro-Kurdish parties in Turkey and is an indispensable component of a lasting solution to the Kurdish issue. Yet a great majority of Turks oppose decentralization in general and autonomous rule of Kurdish-majority provinces in particular, with opposition to Kurdish autonomy exceeding 90 percent. Fear of territorial disintegration, which is popularly known as “the Sèvres syndrome,” that has reigned in the minds of Turks for over a century certainly plays a role here. But another important element here is the widespread social distrust among Turks. In the eyes of most Turks, Kurds are too unreliable to be entitled to autonomous rule. In discussions on regular as well as social media, Kurdish autonomous rule is opposed by an overwhelming majority of Turks, including the well-educated ones. In such discussions, opposition to autonomy is justified with references to some famous Turkish proverbs like “you cannot entrust sheep to a wolf,” the wolf representing “unreliable” Kurdish politicians. Thus, low social trust among Turkish people turns any meaningful move toward decentralized government in Turkey into a “traitorous” political act in the eyes of the masses, thereby making it extremely difficult for governments to move in that direction and take necessary steps.

Recent surveys reveal that Turkey is one the most distrustful societies in the world. In this article, I dealt with how low social trust in Turkey
undermines democratization in general and resolution of the Kurdish issue in particular. Widespread social distrust in Turkey prevents two major requirements of the resolution of Turkey’s Kurdish issue: non-partisan policymaking and popular acceptance of the political rights of Kurds.

The irony is that most Turkish politicians know pretty clearly both what the major Kurdish demands are and how to meet those demands in light of relevant European examples. Responding to the critiques on the AKP government’s talks with senior PKK members and representatives, the speaker of the Turkish Parliament Cemil Cicek stated in September 2011, “Turkey is doing whatever Britain and Spain did.” Moreover, this knowledge is not a result of recent awakening or discovery. Back in 1991, the current Prime Minister Erdogan was able to make the following statements and policy recommendations:

What is named as “Eastern question” is actually a “Kurdish question.” . . . The regions we call East and Southeast fall within the geographical area that was historically called Kurdistan. . . . All legal restrictions on Kurdish identity and culture should be lifted and all those who are willing should be able to have access to education in mother-tongue. . . . Establishment of local parliaments and shrinking of central government are important steps Turkey should take to democratize.

The tragedy is that low social trust and resultant distrustful and polarized politics in Turkey prevent effective application of this knowledge into practice. A commonsensical recommendation in the face of this tragedy is that Turkey should invest on building social trust in order to make its democratization and peace processes more efficient and less costly. Yet there is a dilemma concerning social trust and democracy in Turkey. The literature on the sources of social trust tends to explain high social trust more with political factors at the national level than with individual traits. More specifically, in Kenneth Newton’s words, social trust is higher “the better a nation’s Freedom House score for democracy . . . the more it is run according to the rule of law, the more effective its government institutions, and the less corruption there is.” Hence, Turkey needs to repair its political defects in terms of democracy and governance in order to improve social trust among Turkish people. Thus, as much as Turkish democratization requires higher social trust, higher social trust also requires better democracy and governance.

The mutually reinforcing relationship between social mistrust and imperfect democracy obliges Turkey to follow a more radical and comprehensive strategy toward democratization in general and the resolution of the Kurdish issue in particular. Indeed, this was how another distrustful society (for example, the Spanish) succeeded in adopting a liberal and decentralized political system in the post-Franco period. In the aftermath of General
Franco’s death in 1975, Spain underwent a swift and comprehensive democratization process in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The Spanish Constitution of 1978 aimed at satisfying the demands of large sections of Spanish people through enshrining human rights and the rule of law, acknowledging ethnic and linguistic plurality among the “peoples” of Spain, and introducing a system of autonomous rule by communities. Consequently, the Constitution was approved by an overwhelming majority (88 percent) of Spanish people.

Turkey should follow the Spanish example in order to break the current impasse in the Kurdish issue. Rather than a conflict-resolution strategy that specifically deals with the demands of Kurdish people, Turkey should craft a Constitution that would meet most of the major demands of religious Sunni Turks (such as headscarf freedom in the public domain) and Alevi Turks (such as abolition of the mandatory religion classes in public schools) along with the demands of Kurds (such as decentralization and education in Kurdish language). Such a strategy will create a larger democratic coalition in Turkey, thereby reducing widespread opposition to Kurdish demands and allowing more room for non-partisan politics.

RECOMMENDED READINGS


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