“Radical questions on democracy, outlandish formations,” by Nilüfer Göle*

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Turkey is fast losing its quality of being a model country, but it is still a laboratory that would baffle, even if all the scientists in the world sat down together to understand it.

It is as if all the various complex global and local, regional and historical, religious and mundane dynamics are active in Turkey. We are going through a historic political period where a number of odd and unique experiences are occurring, along with strange alliances and grave political reactions. We are inside a social laboratory that has swallowed our daily lives in its destructive spiral of energy and the safety of which we increasingly doubt.

Yes, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) is losing power every day, but what is being lost is not just that. With it, the weaknesses of the leader and of political Islam are coming to the fore, Muslims are disturbed and being discredited, bureaucrats are losing their reputations, public servants are being transferred, Kurdish peace is trapped in a fight, Alevi neighborhoods are facing police brutality, journalists are being silenced, judicial agencies are losing credibility, state traditions are dissolving, investments are declining and the economy is going into a downward trend. Turkey is losing. But we are finding it difficult to accept that the best days have been left behind. There are many people whose minds are fixed on an old track, who don’t want to lose their privileged positions—or their hopes—and who believe that everything would be wonderful if it wasn’t for conspiracies enacted by powers abroad and the Hizmet movement at home. But unfortunately, this is not the case. History doesn’t move in a straight line. We have already started along a new route. Past achievements are vanishing one by one. Where, why and how are we losing? Let us try to evaluate the situation we are in from different points of view in light of the strange developments of the modern age and radical questions that face democracies.

The age of information and fitna

Today, not just Turkey, but the entire globe is witnessing the rise of the curtain that covered state secrets on one side and the privacy of individuals on the other. The Wikileaks scandal showed us that state secrets can be dissolved at the global level and we learned aspects of American diplomacy that we previously didn’t know. In the information age, the media’s responsibility to provide accurate information goes up and the walls between truth and news, secrets and privacy all disappear. The new age of information means data about individuals, homes and states that land on the radar can be put into circulation.

What will state administration be like without protection of its secrets? How can we speak of personal freedoms in a society where there is no room for privacy? These questions are now on the agenda of every advanced democratic society. But at the end of the day, the
opportunities afforded to us by the age of information and the right and desire of citizens to acquire information are breaking the padlock on privacy and state secrets, placing them in a circle of transparency and making it imperative that adjustments are made to the balance between individual rights and the common good.

The corruption scandal that surfaced in Turkey can be evaluated in terms of the responsibility to provide information to the public. But, because at the same time it is causing fitna, or disagreement among Muslims, it leads to a different kind of oddity. A fight for survival between those trying to prove their innocence and those who say they have been slandered is being fought via the instruments of the post-modern age of communications.

But in spite of material evidence and data, a common perception of reality has not been found. The information has become the subject of a conflict between two versions of reality and a tool of political polarization, rather than assisting to form a consensus on reality. The relationship between information and democracy and news and the truth cannot be established as easily as one thinks it would be, and the minute we think we can reach reality through transparency a shadow is cast on reality.

Radical question: Will democracy be able to establish itself anew as a regime of reality and law in the face of this fitna among Muslims in the age of information?

**The Sultan and the Czar**

It is jointly agreed upon by many intellectuals and writers that power has become personalized. From intellectuals close to the AKP to the harshest critic, everyone stresses that the AKP government has been reduced to Erdoğan’s personality and it has become more authoritarian. Looking at it from this perspective, Turkey is increasingly placing a distance between itself and European nations and starts to resemble emerging countries. Vertical cities, an economy of selling Treasury land and consumption, strong leaders, arbitrary use of resources and intolerance for the opposition are the common administrative properties of emerging countries. These countries are on a route far off from the continental democracy model of Europe.

Western European leaders are increasingly leaving behind the all-powerful, even charismatic, type of leader and moving towards less patriarchal and more lenient personalities. Against this, in other parts of the world, leader models where the governing power is associated with patriarchal and masculine properties are emerging. The world media, based on his undemocratic qualities, draw a parallel between Erdoğan and Ottoman sultans, and between Vladimir Putin and Russian tsars because of his callous cruelty. These leaders are re-animating the imperial past in the unconsciousness of their people. But we can’t say they are similar. The “he-man” portraits of Putin -- who displays his naked upper body on a horse in the wild -- and Erdoğan, who fights at campaign rallies, do not feed from the same cultural pool.
The observation that Erdoğan is increasingly becoming more like Putin -- in an effort to express the view that he has become more authoritarian -- is inadequate and even misleading. Unlike Putin, Erdoğan is a leader that offers promises. According to many, Erdoğan is losing at a time when he was supposed to become one of the most important leaders of the 21st century when he has stolen such different hearts as those of the Islamist reformists on the Arab street, opposition intellectuals in Israel and minorities in Turkey. The sultan is falling behind the czar. He is losing, but Putin, an ordinary despot, is increasing his global influence on the world through usurpation of territory. Crimea is the latest example of this, but it is a very important example because of Europe and Crimea's Ottoman ties.

We can assert that the European history of modernity is shaped according to three circles of civilization. Gerard Delanty argues that Europe is not only shaped by the Christian West, but also the Slavic Byzantine and the Muslim Ottoman Empire. With the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Eastern Europe came into play once again in the creation of Europe, but the Ottoman heritage was left outside. Turkey’s EU candidacy could not revive this heritage. To the contrary, Europe is increasingly being influenced by the Orthodox Russian historic heritage, albeit unwillingly, but the influence of Ottoman Islam inside Europe is diminishing and losing value. The only party responsible for this and the only loser in this is certainly not only Turkey. EU countries missed their historic rendezvous with Turkey knowingly, purposefully.

But in the end, Turkey is losing. European policies have been shelved, the neo-Ottoman vision, which could have gotten a new twist with the Arab spring, sank completely in Syria and backfired in Egypt because of the military coup d’état. Turkey’s political vision degraded in the Middle East, in spite of the country’s being on the side of what is right and of the people. Defending what’s right isn’t always enough to win. The reasons are multidimensional and many actors are at work. But the AKP government could not make a calm analysis of the situation. Instead of using its experience in diplomacy and knowledge of history, it embraced conspiracy theories. The leader and those around him, because of their strong conviction in their righteousness, are seeing every negativity as a betrayal and conspiracy. The strong leader syndrome turns into a “single actor pathology.” However, starting to concoct conspiracy theories is tantamount to confessing one’s weakness. If you are confessing that you are not an actor of history, that means that someone else is writing your history.

AKP’s Turkey, with its businessmen, cultural capital, television serials, festivals and schools once on its way to becoming a global actor is once again falling into the spiral of “weak historicity”, in the hands of one actor.

The personalization of power is an outlandish development. A radical question for democracy: Why is Putin continuing to win?
Muslim citizen, military state and liberal misconception

Another commonly agreed on point is the view that Muslims are worried about becoming victims again, and for this reason are clinging to the AKP. Intellectuals who believe that Erdoğan represents Turkey’s social dynamics cite the support of Muslim citizens as proof that the power of the people is behind him. Intellectuals that are not pro-AKP also point to the intellectual life of the Muslim citizen and his worries. Pro-AKP Muslims, even after 10 years of having the AKP in power, don’t hesitate to speak as if they are still victims and say that they are worried about finding themselves orphaned once again. What’s more, they cling to Erdoğan, whose good days they cherished, even more firmly in these bad times. Urban, well-educated, well-off young men who send their children to Hizmet schools and used to say they “admired” Erdoğan can today say, “I would die if he wanted me to.” Someone who spends his whole day on Twitter can find some good in the Twitter ban, unquestioningly accepting the arguments put forth by the government.

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