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Beyond the Minority Question: Founding Violence and Popular Sovereignty in Turkey

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Kabir Tambar is an assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology at Stanford University. He has also taught in the Department of Religion at the University of Vermont and was a member in the School of Social Sciences at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton in 2011-2012. His work has largely centered on Turkey and has explored questions of citizenship, religion, and the politics of history. This research led to the publication of a book, *The Reckoning of Pluralism: Political Belonging and the Demands of History* (Stanford University Press, 2014). Tambar has also begun new research on military rule and the instabilities of mass politics.

In Turkey, as in many parts of the world today, popular sovereignty is the official ground of political authority. The constitution declares, *egemenlik kayıtsız şartsız milletindedir* — sovereignty rests unconditionally with the nation. Far from simply describing a state of affairs, this declaration has persistently been the source of political tensions. Where are the people permitted to assemble? Who is authorized to speak on their behalf? More broadly, who indeed constitute the people and manifest its political will?

This paper explored some of the historical and contemporary tensions that have shaped ideas of popular sovereignty in Turkey. It took as its point of departure the protests that emerged around Gezi Park in Istanbul in 2013. The protests managed to draw together a surprisingly diverse coalition of groups. While some protestors proudly waved flags of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the paradigmatic symbol of the secular nation-state, others participated as ethnic minorities, radical leftists, LGBTQ supporters, and anti-capitalist Muslims. For some protestors, the problem was the ruling party's increasingly restrictive control on public life; for others the issue was more about the use of extraordinary police violence to contain dissent; for others, the issue was, in fact, about a public park,

the privatization of public spaces, and the privileging of corporate wealth over public goods.

My paper examined a small slice of this emergent political landscape, looking at a number of social and political events in which the historical significance of the protests was put under dispute: a speech delivered by a Kurdish politician, some remarks delivered by a largely Kurdish mothers of the disappeared group, and some extemporaneous commentary given by street musicians who hailed from the Black Sea. While the Kurdish cases raised questions about police violence against citizens, the Black Sea musicians demanded accountability for state-led efforts that have led to environmental destruction. Each of these cases provides an in-road into thinking about popular sovereignty, but they turn our attention away from classic questions of legitimacy that have oriented political theory — for instance, whether an elected government’s use of state security against protestors expresses or betrays the will of the people. Instead, my talk was interested in how these critiques unbundle the dense historical connotations of popular sovereignty in Turkey — questioning, for instance, how notions of “the people” have been defined through a history of violence.

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In the talk, I argued that these lines of critique also reveal how the category of the people is intrinsically bound to the concept of “minority,” as the latter has been defined since World War One with the fall of empires in central and south-eastern Europe and the Middle East. Since that time, the figure of the minority has been understood in many of these contexts as a population that does not belong to the nation. Those who have been officially classed as minorities have been subject to forced deportation, international population exchange, or massacre. The minority is not simply excluded from the nation; that very exclusion has been a definitive precondition of national sovereignty itself. The Kurdish and Black Sea social actors that I discussed were drawing attention to this constitutive exclusion of the minority, raising questions about the history of violence that has demarcated the limits of popular sovereignty in Turkey.

I offer here a brief overview of my presentation, focusing on some of the historical problems that emerged in the linking of popular sovereignty to the category of minority. The talk itself also included a fuller discussion of the Kurdish and Black Sea social actors alluded to above. In this text, I will only briefly mention them in order to indicate some of the traces and effects of the historical dilemmas of popular sovereignty in the present.

The founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923 was defined by the minority question. By this, I do not simply mean that, as with any nation-state, early Republican leaders strove to standardize language, history, cultural heritage and so on, in such a way as to marginalize religious and ethnic minorities. In many respects, this process did in fact occur. But the emergence of the Turkish Republic — which took place during the global historical moment after the conclusion of World War One — was marked by a more specific concern with the concept of minority. From 1919 to 1923, the peace settlements that concluded the war were drawn up. Historian Eric Weitz notes that these settlements were premised on a new conception of politics, focused on

discrete populations and the ideal of national homogeneity. He provocatively argues that this conviction enabled two seemingly contrary historical results: on the one hand, a new concern for the legal protection of minorities and, on the other hand, forced deportations of populations from their historical homelands to new nation-states where they were now said to more authentically belong.¹ According to Weitz, it was not the case that new protections for minorities were simply a humanitarian response meant to safeguard those communities from oppressive majorities. A certain violence was part and parcel of those protections and of that new concern for the minority.

The formation of the Turkish state exemplifies this conundrum that was at the heart of the post war global order. From the republic's foundation in 1923, Jewish, Armenian Christian, and Greek Christian communities were recognized as minorities and offered legal protections concerning their autonomy of religious organization. And yet, in the years leading up to the formation of the republican state, Armenian communities were deported or exiled out of their historical homelands in Anatolia, and the Lausanne Treaty that promised minority recognition was also the context in which the so-called population exchanges that forced much of the Greek community to leave Turkey was negotiated.

In this context, to be recognized as a minority meant that one gained certain rights and protections from the state. However, it also carried the weight of an extraordinary historical judgment, at once moral and political, namely that the community in question was thenceforth to be viewed as in some sense external to the nation and its history, external to the body politic, and so also of suspect loyalty, even in cases where the "minority" population had deep historical roots in the territory now dominated by the new nation-state. If sovereignty in the republican state belonged to the people, those who were now classed as minorities would always be ambiguously connected to this project. They were legally recognized as citizens and yet treated as suspect others. As Aron Rodrigue argues, they "could remain Turkish citizens, but they would never be true Turks."²

I have focused here very narrowly on the years following World War One, but seen from the perspective of Turkish political leaders of that time, the peace settlements were the culmination of a much longer history, extending back to the now defunct Ottoman Empire. From the late 1830s, the Ottoman state began issuing decrees that some scholars view as establishing a kind of quasi or proto-citizenship, extended to all subjects of the sultan regardless of religious affiliation, and the first Ottoman constitution was promulgated in 1876.³ Efforts by imperial elites,

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as well as by leaders of various religious communities, sought to define an Ottoman citizenship, a sense of allegiance to a single political community that would extend across the religiously and ethnically heterogeneous empire.⁴ These forays into an inter-communal conception of citizenship were almost immediately curtailed, as the empire itself began losing territories and populations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to rival empires and new nationalist movements.

The vexed conjuncture of deportation and protection that defined the minority question after World War 1 was, in effect, a violent resolution of the conundrum of popular sovereignty that had been raging for nearly a century. The question, across this span of time, was never simply about *who* was sovereign — the sultan or the people. It was always and at the same time a meta-discursive question — a framing question — about *which* people and in the context of *what* state. What was dramatically on display at the time was the fact that this framing question required, as a condition of its possibility, the ability to identify populations that could not be included, populations whose exclusion in the form of deportation, exile, or genocide was constitutive of “the people” and the national state that would now speak in its name.

I refer to this framing question as the problem of the founding of popular sovereignty. It is a question of founding because the terms in question — the popular and the sovereign — both needed to be instituted. Neither were positive empirical entities that simply existed; it was not the case that a people rose up and seized power from an old regime. The people in question needed to be constituted and in effect were compelled to persistently re-constitute themselves as certain territories and populations were excised and expelled. The questions, which people and in the context of what state, were highly unstable and open questions that the peace settlements of World War One and the minority clauses were meant to bring into order.

The normative burden imposed on the category of minority helps to explain why many communities in Turkey today, who might otherwise seek legal protection under its banner, repudiate the term. In the past decade certain communities, like Turkey’s Alevi community, have been encouraged by the European Union to pursue rights as a religious minority. Yet overwhelmingly, Alevi civil society groups have rejected that label, even as they wage a struggle for collective rights that are in fact offered to recognized minorities, like exemption from state-mandated religion courses in elementary and secondary schools. Alevis that reject the label of minority often justify their repudiation of the term with the claim that they are foundational elements of the Turkish state.⁵

Even very small communities of evangelical Christians, who are mostly converts from Sunni Islam in the Turkish context, reject the moniker of “minority,” and go further, by distancing themselves socially and religiously from Christian communities that were historically present in Anatolia, such as the Armenians and Greeks that were recognized as minorities in the early twentieth century. They employ Turkish language and music in their religious ceremonies, even in the Kurdish regions of the country, in order to emphasize their connection to the Turkish nation. In justifying their rejection of the term minority, some evangelical converts have gone so far as to claim that their form of Christianity is in fact an authentically Turkish form of religiosity, because much of the Bible was historically written in Anatolia and was therefore shaped by Turkish culture. As a result, some converts claim that Christianity suits a Turkish lifestyle.⁶

What these contexts reveal is that the problem of founding popular sovereignty — the question of which people and in the context of what state — continues to be posed today. For groups like Alevis and Evangelicals, the issue is not whether they can be included as legal citizens, which these groups are constitutionally granted without question. What these groups share, however distinct their social and religious location in contemporary Turkey, is the dilemma of needing to

“...the dilemma of needing to persistently prove that they are and have been faithful to the Turkish state and that they are and have been part of the Turkish people.”

persistently prove that they are and have been faithful to the Turkish state and that they are and have been a part of the Turkish people. It is as though the problem of founding popular sovereignty was not resolved once and for all in 1923, with the promulgation of a constitution that vested sovereignty in the people. Public debates about these communities suggest instead that the problem of founding remains alive, as an agitating element of political life today.

The Kurdish groups and the Black Sea musicians mentioned above, and who I discussed at greater length in my talk, encouraged their respective audiences to

view the plans to destroy Gezi park as a moment in a longer history. They suggested that state violence, as it has been known in the Black Sea or the Kurdish southeast in forms ranging from environmental destruction to forced disappearances, is increasingly delocalized and stands as a historical precedent for a more general problem about popular sovereignty. They are arguing that the regional specificity of state violence is no longer to be viewed as exceptional to, but as exemplary of, the general norm.

In presenting these arguments, these critics rubbed against the grain of some Gezi protestors themselves, who sought to cast the clashes between protestors and police as a remarkably new confrontation, brought about by the increasing authoritarianism of the current ruling government. Were that the case, the problem would simply be that the government is not living up to the established principle of popular sovereignty. What the Kurdish and Black Sea critics were pointing out is that the state has long acted violently against some of its citizens in the name of protecting the “true Turks,” in Rodrigue’s phrase. There has always been a problem of who to exclude in order to constitute the people. They are pointing to a historically perduring problem that inheres in the founding of popular sovereignty. The minority is not being valorized by these critics where once it was denigrated, as for instance in liberal calls for a more inclusive republic. The persistent dilemma with that kind of liberalism, in Turkey as elsewhere, is that it remains premised on the perspective of the majority, who can then offer or withhold tolerance to the marginalized.⁷ Instead of that kind of framework, the denigration of the minority — as a historical judgment and a set of political practices that have embodied that judgment — is being held up as a predicament that is increasingly shared by those who may otherwise have identified with the majority.

I conclude here with the suggestion that these interrogations are as much about ethics as they are about politics — or rather, they enable an ethical inquiry into politics. They demand a more equal and just application of the law, but they do so not solely or even primarily through the political discourse of minority rights and recognition; instead they shift the critical burden to the category of majority and query the very aspiration to majority status. Further ethnographic

research can help illuminate how foundational categories of political modernity, such as popular sovereignty, are opened up to ethical critique in the present, as communities and populations question the terms of belonging presupposed by such categories and fashion alternate modes of political cohabitation.

¹ Eric D. Weitz, "From the Vienna to the Paris System: International Politics and the Entangled Histories of Human Rights, Forced Deportations, and Civilizing Missions," *The American Historical Review* 113 (5), 2008: 1313-1343.

² Aron Rodrigue, "Reflections on Millets and Minorities: Ottoman Legacies," in *Turkey Between Nationalism and Globalization*, ed. Riva Kastoryano (New York: Routledge, 2013), 44.

³ On proto-citizenship, see Ariel Salzmann, "Citizens in Search of a State: The Limits of Political Participation in the Late Ottoman Empire," in *Extending Citizenship, Reconfiguring States*, eds. Michael Hanagan and Charles Tilly (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999), 37-66.

⁴ For excellent analyses of how Ottoman citizenship was taken up by various religious communities in the empire, see Michelle Campos, *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early Twentieth Century Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); Julia Phillips Cohen, *Becoming Ottomans: Sephardi Jews and Imperial Citizenship in the Modern Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁵ Kabir Tambar, *The Reckoning of Pluralism: Political Belonging and the Demands of History in Turkey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

⁶ Esra Özyürek, "Christian and Turkish: Fears of a Converted Nation," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 29 (3), 2009: 398-412.

⁷ For this argument, see Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).