

# Fears and Hopes in Turkish Politics

## *Problematica* in conversation with Ödül Celep



Recent mass movements in Middle Eastern and North African countries, despite their defeats and failures, showed prospects and possibilities of a progressive change or a progressive mass organization in the region. Fulfillment of these possibilities requires concentrating on attaining a comprehensive, critical knowledge of the region's social, political, economic and cultural mechanisms and relations. To achieve these initial goals, *Problematica* has started series of interviews with progressive or leftist Middle Eastern and North African intellectuals, activist and MENA scholars. In this interview, we have put some questions to Ödül Celep (PhD: State University of New York, Binghamton) is an associate professor of political science at the International Relations Department of Işık University, Istanbul. His research interests include political parties, political culture, intra-party democracy and voting behavior in Turkey and Western Europe. His dissertation *The Extreme Right and Democracy* (2006) was published in 2009, in both Turkish (Istanbul, Turkey) and English (Saarbrücken, Germany). He published on political parties of Turkey on various social science journals such as *Parliamentary Affairs*, *South European Society and Politics*, and *Insight Turkey*. In the series of interviews, as yet we have published interview with Gilbert Achcar ([Farsi version](#) and [English version](#)) and Joesph Daher ([Farsi version](#) and [English version](#)).

**\* How do you define “Left” and “Leftist Politics” or if you prefer “Progressive Politics”? What are the main theoretical elements of this kind of politics?**

Despite varieties of leftism in space and time, I mean across countries and over the years, there is something universal in the history the left, that is, a demand for change. Then the question becomes ‘what kind of change’. We mean progressive change, of course. There is this belief that time only brings progress, better days. Nazis defined themselves as revolutionaries too, but we don’t cite them as revolutionaries today because the changes they promoted were changes towards an artificially-glorified, imperial and imperialist, reactionary past. In the context of change demanded by the left/progressive politics, we need to be thinking about change in a ‘positive’ way, that is, in accordance with the democratic accumulation and wisdom of world communities and generations. A change towards more equality, a change towards more freedom, a package of changes for more equality and freedom could be left politics of a time. Take Civil Rights struggles of African-Americans and their achievements for desegregation and voting rights back in the 1960s. Take the second wave of feminism and anti-Vietnam protests back in the same period. During the French Revolution of the late 18th Century, it was the bourgeoisie together with the peasantry, which were progressive as opposed to aristocracy and religious clergy, which were reactionary. The bourgeois demanded a more enlightened system of constitutional monarchy as opposed to the ancient regime of absolutism. In later decades, when Socialism emerged as an ideology for the proletariat to the left of liberal bourgeoisie, the latter started to fall behind and remain regressive compared to a younger and more left-progressive ideology. A progressive ideology or politics of a particular time and space can regress backwards in the long run. As of today in the West, that is Europe and Anglo-America, the main components of left and progressive politics include themes like social justice, identity politics, minority rights, redistribution, peace, human rights, gender equality/liberation, ecological politics, radical and grassroots democracy, fighting poverty and fascism, promoting cosmopolitan citizenship, and many others on similar lines.

**\* Many scholars admit that following the collapse of so-called socialist bloc, we see demise in leftist politics in MENA. Now according to the theoretical elements you mentioned above, how we can reconstruct the Left in Middle East and North Africa? What are – or precisely – what should be the elements of a leftist politics in these societies? Or historical, social, economic and political realities in MENA demand what kind of leftism? Of course, you can answer this question concentrating on Turkish experience and history.**

This is a grand question, how to construct the future of MENA from the left. When we say Middle East and North Africa, we are referring a variety of lands and nation-states, geographically and technically. Just like left-progressive politics changing and evolving

over time and space, right-conservative politics evolves similarly in dialectical dynamics of contrast. The socialist bloc represented by the leadership of the former USSR was a highly regressed, corrupt system in time, like I mentioned about a progressive idea regressing over time. The right-wing political elites of the Cold War period had this tendency of lumping together all kinds and versions of the left in the same bowl of the dirty word 'communist' or 'socialist' therefore 'Stalinist' therefore 'totalitarian' therefore 'a threat to democracy'. In fact, contrary to this pragmatist right-wing labeling strategy against the entire left aisle, it is fair to talk about a variety of leftism in the intellectual baggage of the left across Western Europe and the world at the time and since then. Chomsky explains the break-up of the socialist left into two major branches: pro-state and anti-state. Pro-state branch evolves to Bolshevism, Leninism and Stalinism while anti-state branch evolves towards anarchism, anarcho-Communism and the like. Historically, we can talk about a few major crossroads of world socialists such as World War I, Bolshevik Revolution, World War II, as well as the collapse of Soviet Communism in the world. The shattered consensus after WWI was socialist internationalism, as socialists of the world broke into pro-war and anti-war factions. After the defeat of fascism at the end of WWII, the dilemma of Socialists was 'socialism via revolution or with democracy?' Many socialists of West Europe preferred to go with democratic ways of establishing socialism rather than violence, armed struggles or revolutions. Later, starting with the political upheavals of the politics of the late 1960s and also after the demise of USSR and Communism as a system in the late 1980s, the democratic socialists and social democrats of Europe embraced issues beyond traditional themes of class politics, redistribution and labor: gender issues, ecology, minority rights, identity politics, and so on. Therefore, they redefined and extended the concept of the 'politics of the oppressed' from the traditional proletariat and middle classes to also women, immigrants, asylum-seekers, non-whites, indigenous peoples, LGBT peoples, the disabled and the environment.

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As a person who is not fully equipped on the entire political landscape of the Middle East, I can say we can make sense of the experience of the Western European left in our own ways. There are certain issues we cannot incorporate into mainstream politics of all countries, or just 'fix' by ourselves. The current conditions of the Middle East and its countries are quite different from the conditions of the West back in the 1960s, with differences among them as well. What we can do, as far as I can think of, is promote civic values, contribute to the construction and strengthening of healthy civil societies in MENA countries, enrich the intellectual debates with progressive values like democratization, decentralization of power, gender equality, denounce all kinds of fascisms, religious fundamentalisms, sectarianisms and nationalisms in the region for collective peace. Easier said and dreamt than done, and we civilian scholars are quite limited in our spheres of influence.

**\* How about political organization and social mobilization? What are the main challenges and opportunities with which leftist activists encounter in the way of organization and mobilization?**

One of the most significant obstacles to progressives' organization and mobilization has been conservative governments, which are often afraid of bottom-up revolutionary movements and waves therefore suppress social unrests and restrict their channels of representation and participation. Conservative public may also constitute a barrier, but there are legitimate ways of resistance and mobilization. Freedom of assembly could be restricted, and grassroots mobilization could have its own barriers and weaknesses. For instance, in autocratic environments, there could be collective action problems, and many leftist people who would have otherwise raised their voices against injustices could prefer to remain silent or stay home instead as free riders, thinking that someone else will do the business anyway. That's understandable. So the problems and challenges could be legal, institutional and political at the macro level, and psychological and individual at the micro level. Cooperation, solidarity and intellectual interaction are all important. We also need to find ways to spread progressive ideas and make them match people's demands and interests on the landscape. One example, and it is not the only example, is the use of traditional and social media, which I have always stayed away for instance. But we know social media plays a role in bringing peoples together, as we saw with the most recent Arab uprisings in the region. States and government oppress, censor, restrict but technology and freedom always finds a way out, at least that's what many of us know.

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**\* Let's turn to more specific events and phenomena in the Turkey. When AK Party rose to power in 2002, many Muslim intellectuals and Muslim Liberals like Hakan Yavuz were really hopeful and optimistic about democratic nature of this party and other neo-Islamic parties. Besides Muslim intellectuals we see some Western observers like John Esposito who sympathize with this optimism. How do explain the rise of AKP? Are hopes to AKP still alive?**

All those hopes are shattered already and for long. A lot of things changed since then. The early AKP government years were marked with a wave of liberal and progressive legislations also within the context of EU harmonization. No more. The transition from the early Islamist to the new AKP years was marked by a transition from monarchy to oligarchy in party politics. Necmettin Erbakan, the former Islamist leader, was the unquestionable and absolute leader, while Erdogan was only first among equals, in journalist and scholar Ruşen Çakır's correct words. In time, the AKP's oligarchic and relatively liberal rule evolved towards Erdogan's authoritarian and illiberal directions. The early AKP was a hope for the excluded pious and other peripheral masses like Kurds. As AKP rule evolved towards Erdoğan's rule, the AKP government also changed from

moderate conservative to more Islamist and authoritarian directions with old reflexes of the old, Kemalist state tradition, this time with no secularist but a highly Sunni-Islamist tendency and power. The Gezi incidents and the 17-25 December corruption charges against AKP, followed by the split between the party and the Gülen movements further reinforced the protective reflexes of the AKP-Erdoğan rule in the last three years. As of today, the two-year peace process with the Kurds is also broken with new waves of clashes between state forces and the PKK, Kurdistan Workers' Party and its extensions. Erdoğan is obviously one of the primary decision-makers in the current state of armed conflicts. There are still sources of hope, but I am not sure how realistic these sources are. The AKP base is experiencing a conflict these days between unconditionally loyal Erdoğanists and a more confused group of AKP-ists who take the party leadership in less personalistic, and party itself in more institutional terms. The three opposition parties are unlikely to trust one another and make a unified bloc of solidarity against the AKP-Erdoğan rule, but the maneuvers of the former AKP political elites who are in the party periphery these days may slightly change things in the medium run. People like Bülent Arınç, Hüseyin Çelik and Sadullah Ergin are softly criticizing the current illiberal policies like the excessive re-securitization of the Kurdish issue, the current attempts to remove the legislative immunity of the HDP deputies, and the attack on the press by the use of legal state power. If they can make a meaningful conflict within the AKP elites, members and voters, this may work to the advantage of the AKP's getting its independence from only one source of power. But we don't know if these dissenters are just a flash phenomenon or possess a potential to change things positively in the long run. The opposition voices within AKP today may need to confront Erdoğan directly tomorrow, and I don't know how that's going to happen.

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**\* What were the mechanisms AKP used in consolidation of its power?**

AKP consolidated its power by, first and foremost winning electoral victories over consecutive elections. AKP represents a successful amalgamation of the former Islamist and former secular center right party traditions. In its early years, the AKP was successful in shifting from an old-school Islamist rhetoric of conspiracy theories to a new tradition of modern conservatism, at least it seemed, sounded and felt so. In the old days before the AKP, the most serious and challenging state institutions against Islamist conservatism and anti-secular activities were the military first and foremost, followed by the judiciary, and the mainstream media all controlled by secularist and corporate circles. In time and also with the help of the Gülen movement, the AKP government could manage to sideline all these institutions first, then control these institutions by filling them with their own cadres, capturing the state from within in the most traditional manner. As Erdoğan himself became the AKP's chief by himself, as he was challenged by new opposition actors like the Gezi youth and the late Gülen movement, he chose to consolidate his power by strategically turning into a controversial, polarizing

figure, rallying his bases around him, and thus consolidating his electoral power over and over. All the attempts to overthrow the single-party AKP rule at least, failed one by one, including the Kurdish left party's (HDP's) incredible electoral victory with a 13 percent of the vote in June 7, 2015 general elections. So, by not only winning consecutive elections and forming single-party governments but also by transforming the state institutions in its way, the AKP could change the status quo of Turkey. The former foes, the AKP and the military, are now the new allies. But this is only one side of the story, still not the whole picture. Ferhat Kentel, a prominent sociologist at Şehir University, argues correctly that it was the state, which captured the AKP from within, gently and carefully. The voice of the oppressed periphery turned into a central oppressor in time, which is not the first of its kind in Turkey's Republican history. Just look back at the Demokrat Party, PM Adnan Menderes of the 1950s, what did they say before they came to power, and what they did when they were in power, the same old story.

**\* Turkish Army used to launch coups whenever a government showed slightest signs of Islamism, but it has adopted a collaborative stance toward AKP government. "The former foes, the AKP and the military, are now the new allies", you said. How this reconciliation took place?**

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Yes, the Army of Turkey used to be a much more influential actor in Turkey's domestic politics for quite a long time. This 'strong army' is a part of Turkey's overlord 'father state' tradition, and it dates back to late Ottoman and early Turkish Republican years as well. But the real initiative for the army's involvement in civilian politics came with the 1960 coup (which took down the Demokrat Party government of the 1950s) and the subsequent 1961 Constitution, which was designed to extend political expression, assembly, organization and individual liberties. At those times, many progressives praised the 1960 coup, and the 1961 Constitution is still cited as the most libertarian constitution in Turkey's recent history. But later, with the growing rise of the 'fear of Communism' in the Cold War context, the Army turned its political compass to the right with the 1971 memorandum and eventually the 1980 coup, which crushed all political groups but mostly the left. In the post-Cold War times of the 1980s and 1990s, the new threats became Kurdish separatism (due to the rise of the PKK, Kurdistan Workers' Party, recognized as a terrorist organization officially in Turkey) and growing Islamist revivalism for the army. So, what we witnessed in these decades was a switch from fear of Communism to fear of separation and Islamist reactionarism. The 1995 elections witnessed the victory of an Islamist Party, Welfare Party, for the first time. The subsequent experience with the Refah-Yol coalition, formed between Welfare Party and the secular center-right True Party Party, in 1996-97 became the key factors, first escalating the tensions in the army-civilian relations and subsequently the rise of 'moderate Islamism' with the early AKP years in Turkey.

The Refah-yol coalition became very controversial for the military bureaucracy, the judiciary and the mainstream media of the times. Eventually, with the increasing iron fist of the secularist military followed by the judiciary and the media, the coalition was broken and a hard-liner secularist 'February 28 process' came into play. This was a top-down process in which the military got heavily involved in the business of civilian politics, followed by closing of some sections of religious schools, a witch-hunt on state employees of particular profiles and so on. It was around those times that the former Islamist Welfare Party came at a crossroads and divided into two branches, traditionalists and reformists. The traditionalists turned into fringe party politics while reformers became the champion of all elections with AKP and Erdoğan. The AKP won decisively starting with 2002 general elections and continuing victories with 2004 local, 2007, 2011, 2014 local, and 2015 general elections. During its early years, the AKP government was quite silent and modest on controversial issues of secularism. In fact, during the progressive times of the early AKP years, the government passed legislations in accordance with the EU harmonization package, which included eliminating state security courts, changing the organizational structure of the National Security Council in favor of civilian members (by declining military presence thus breaking military superiority in the NSC), eliminating death penalty and the like. So these legislations also helped curb the military domination in Turkey.

7 But later, also owing to AKP's close relations with the Gülen movement, a legal process of vengeance was initiated by the prosecutors of the AKP times towards the former military and state actors of the 'February 28' and other hardliner, secularist, oppressive actors of the recent past. A lot of people from the military bureaucracy, including former chief of staff, was jailed with accusations of organizing clandestine organizations for plotting against the civilian governments in Turkey. It was around these times that the leverage of the army got really broken towards the civilian governments in Turkey. Several old-school secularist generals and high rank military officers either resigned or retired during this process, which opened the ways of upward mobility for new generations in the army. In time, the interventionist setting and tone of the military waned. This marked the relative end of the military tutelage in Turkey (according to some experts and circles, this process still didn't end the risk of military takeover and the army can still make a come back but I disagree). Eventually, we became a more 'normal' country in terms of military-civilian relations. However, some progressive intellectuals like Nuray Mert started to talk about a 'civilian dictate', a civilian and autocratic takeover of things in Turkey. What they mean is the excessive power and influence of one party AKP and PM then President Erdoğan on everything. The modesty and progressivism of the early times are gone, and we have arrogance, power hunger and old-school reactionarism instead. Now we have to normalize our Islamist civilian politics. Now our secular military and Islamist government are united in their fight

against Kurdish separatism to the extent of disrupting democratic rights and achievements of the recent past, such as the peace deal that lasted for two years.

Look, let us remember what happened after 9-11 in the US. It was George W. Bush who was the US president, and the US army invaded Iraq on bogus charges in 2003. We all know what justifications they used and how they proved wrong. It was an awful and not very smart civilian leader, and the entire military of a super power was led into an unnecessary war of lies and bullshits by this leader. So, the fact that civil-military relations are 'normal' like in every other democracy doesn't mean normalized civil-military relations are always the most democratic, justifiable or peaceful. We need to think beyond all experiences of democracy, we always learn from our past, collective experiences.

So, to wrap up, this conciliation took place with a series of consequent events, predicted and unexpected outcomes altogether. Recently, a columnist Metin Münir, asked this question for secularists "do we wish the military could make a come back?" He answers his own opinion "no." The fact that secular progressives are suffering under a highly authoritarian course of affairs in Turkey doesn't mean we should repeat our mistakes in the past knowingly. I agree with Münir. Despite all our criticism of the AKP government, Erdoğan and Davutoğlu.. no, I didn't miss the generals either.

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8 **\* Can we say that AKP was successful in implementing Islamic socio-cultural policies and dictating Islamic life styles? What were the social resistances to these policies?**

This is a mixed success, and the extensions of AKP's Islamist socio-cultural policies will also take long-term trends to say a success or failure. Though AKP has turned more illiberal and authoritarian in time, it is still a pragmatist party. At the beginning, the AKP did not want to disturb the secular circles for probably both sincere and strategic purposes. But as it consolidated its power, particularly Erdoğan turned into an actor of Islamic teachings and lifestyles as opposed to the seemingly moderate character of Abdullah Gül, the AKP's second man if you will. Politicization of lifestyle issues in the secular-religious cleavage context is nothing new to us, issues like women's headscarves in public space, alcohol sale and consumption, together with debates on abortion, gender equality, gender-mixed university residence, as well as Islamization of the education system and its curriculum. One of the causes behind the Gezi Park protests was Erdoğan's polarizing rhetoric on lifestyle issues, such as alcohol and gender equality. The governments before AKP government were not the most libertarian governments either, but what Erdoğan did as PM was to change the nature of ministry responsible for women's affairs, and assign his only woman minister to the ministry responsible for family affairs. In many instances, he emphasized the initial duty of women as motherhood. All in all, these agenda items can be contextualized within the framework of both Islamism and conservatism of a sort, definitely not progressive, liberal or



feminist policy. We recently paid attention to the programs for the March 8 Women's Day. Erdoğan spoke too, and he emphasized again that women's primary role in society is motherhood and criticized family planning with conspiracy theories like "they are trying to reduce our population", whichever external enemies "they" refers to, while his wife Emine Erdoğan recently praised Ottoman harems as training places for women. Are these the most politically correct expressions for praising one's fellow human beings on a special day?

Well, we know from the Kemalist experience that top-down social engineering for creating a new type of a citizen does not work, or works very limited. The early Republican regime pursued authoritarian politics to create a new, Westernized, secular, urban, educated 'Turk', now the criticism is that the AKP government is trying to create another new, more traditional, more pious, more conservative citizen profile for Turkey one way or another. People are hard to make fit into any monolithic category. Eventually, we will understand that such projects are always doomed. They never work, actually. Peoples of Turkey will end up neither.

**\* For many years, economic development model of AKP – a mixture of Islamic values, bourgeois ethics and neoliberal policies – was prescribed for other countries in the region, but it seem that this model is wrecked so that AKP uses bare violence and manipulation to save power. How do judge AKP records in economic development and what is the alternative development program for Turkey?**

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This is a difficult question. The former Islamists led by Erbakan pursued a rhetoric of some Islamic economics they referred to as 'just order' or 'fair deal'. No one really knew what type of an economic order that stood for. For instance, it de-emphasized interest rate banking in favor of an alternative policy called 'profit share', but that was also criticized for hypocrisy, the same thing under a different label. However, the former Islamist movement and Erbakan were openly both anti-Socialist and anti-Capitalist on the similar lines of justification of the old-school European Christian Democrats: the argument that both Socialism and Capitalism materialize and commodify human values and morality. The AKP is definitely non-Socialist, but it's highly and savagely capitalist to the extent of anti-labor and anti-ecology extremes. When criticized for destruction of Nature, say the third Bosphorus bridge, the third Istanbul airport or the Kanal-Istanbul project, their response is often primitive, like "we are the most nature-friendly actually, it's all because they are jealous" kind of cheap populism, which actually works for them. Another important subject is the independence of the central bank in Turkey, which often reveals the level of tension between Erdoğan and bureaucrats there. Maybe you'd better talk to an economist to go deeper into the economic policy issues.

**\* How do you explain foreign policies of AKP in power? Can we understand these policies only as Neo-Ottomanism of Erdogan or there are more economic and geopolitical interests behind them?**

Foreign policy is one domain AKP has not been successful at all, especially recent times. In the early days, especially when Davutoglu was the foreign affairs minister, the official understanding was called 'zero problems with neighbors', yet there were still criticisms about a Pax Ottomana orientation and understanding back then. Neo-Cons of America got mad at AKP at certain points, like the Mavi Marmara incident with Israel. But at home, several progressive or pragmatist experts mention the early times as the good old days, but I am not so sure to refer to them as good days either. Maybe compared to the much more troubled times of today, yes. However you call it, the AKP elites more or less come from a right-wing political tradition, many would call their origins 'religious right' if not 'radical right', and we know the two overlap largely as well. There is this reactionary nostalgia for an artificially-glorified past for the good old Ottoman days, a longing for some imperialist past of some sort. "We used to be much more influential in our region, but the Republic, secularism, Mustafa Kemal's tradition of nation-statehood prevented us from showing our Ottoman potentials, let us get over our Republican complexes and weaknesses, and behave like Ottomans again." Maybe a simple statement like this could summarize the mindsets of AKP prominent figures; not only Erdoğan and Davutoğlu but also Abdullah Gül, Bülent Arınç and many others as well. Can an understanding like this find peace in the region? I'd say no. I recently saw Ruşen Çakır's interview with Gönül Tol and Ömer Taşpınar, prominent Middle East scholars at the Middle East Institute in America. They say the former criticisms towards the AKP came from restricted circles like Neo Cons. Recently, the criticisms became much more mainstream from the US media. From what they say, it seems the US is taking Turkey's democratization as a vital issue for their security interests in the region as well. The current escalations of tensions with the Kurdish forces do not work America's interests either.

**\* What are the current alternatives of AKP in Turkey? Can HDP play an active role as opposition in near future? What about Kurdish groups that fight in Syria?**

Among legal parties, only HDP possessed that potential and we saw it on June 7, 2015 elections. Later, with the manipulations of both the AKP-Erdogan policies and the irresponsible behavior of the PKK, HDP was crushed in-between. Instead of using their potential to make moves to becoming a party of Turkey from the ethnic-regionalist fringes, HDP was forced to choose between its political cause and pragmatics of becoming a mainstream party. It went or had to go the first way, probably not very happily. CHP and MHP are highly inefficient. Recently, MHP is dealing with a fight for leadership, and ironically, if one of the challengers, namely Meral Akşener could become

the next MHP chair, things could change in favor of opposition forces, but I am speaking in probabilistic terms. We had the opportunity to change things in Turkey back in June 7, and it just didn't work. MHP was one of the key actors behind the repeat elections, which changed the electoral dynamics to AKP's favor again. We know MHP has an existential problem with HDP but when this problem is pushed towards the extremes, like the current MHP leader Bahçeli does, it works to everyone's disadvantage, only to Erdoğan and AKP's excessive advantage. MHP should learn to live peacefully with the Kurdish left movement and HDP, period. If they can coexist peacefully under one roof, that is the national assembly TBMM, they should also adjust themselves to do politics together from time to time. What we are experiencing with growing authoritarianism today has partially to do with the disconnectedness and dispersion of the three opposition parties. They must be able to form a unified front against the AKP in the name of peoples and electorates they represent, but they can never do this. It's not HDP which has an existential problem with MHP, it's MHP which has that with HDP. If you ask HDP, they would not mind shaking hands and cooperating with MHP on occasions as necessary.

The Kurdish groups that fight in Syria are so distant to Turkey's domestic party politics. YPG is an armed group, PYD is a civilian group as far as I know. But the current political elites in Turkey strategically and sincerely lump all Kurdish actors in the bowl of terrorism, PKK, YPG and PYD. More than that, they juxtapose PKK-YPG-PYD with ISIL and Boko Haram too. Turkey wants the US and other international actors to recognize PYD, for instance, a terrorist organization, but the US refuses to do so also because Kurds are the most effective fighters against ISIL on the ground recently. How could PYD contribute to Turkey's democracy directly or indirectly in the absence of a non-receptive government in Turkey, I really don't know. If we were maintaining our peace process today, if the peace was not broken in the last months, I would be thinking of an answer to this question probably quite differently though.

**\* What is the role of CHP as the biggest opposition party? Can CHP play a leading role in process of democratization and opposing AKP government? How about MHP as an ultra-right party?**

Neither CHP nor MHP has been effective opposition parties for different and similar reasons: ineffective leadership, lack of electoral mobilization and vision, lack of intra-party democracy, lack of enthusiasm to challenge AKP effectively, organizational weaknesses, disconnections with masses and so on. In fact, let us be fair to Republican People's Party, CHP. They wasted a lot of time with their former chair Deniz Baykal and his Stalinist rule in the party. But with the new chair Kılıçdaroğlu, they tried. At least they tried to do, say, and feel different. It just didn't work. Kılıçdaroğlu is not a charismatic enough leader to appeal to the pro-AKP masses and wider electorates of

Turkey beyond urban, secular middle classes. For one thing, what CHP needs is a charismatic, positive, progressive and populist leader, who can sweep the elections and really challenge the AKP. What CHP needs is an Obama. CHP needs its own Obama. This feels more like a dream than a reality on the landscape. MHP is an entirely different story. Back in the 1970s, the Nationalist Action Party, MHP, was a single-issue anti-Communist movement. A lot changed since then, with new conditions like the 1980 military coup in Turkey, the fall of Soviet Union and Communism in the world, and the passing of MHP's absolute leader and founding father Alparslan Türkeş. They got more moderate, and their new leadership with Devlet Bahçeli showed signs of democratic maneuvers initially. As of recently, Bahçeli shows quite weak and ineffective leadership too. Plus, he does his best to prevent his three challengers for party chair position, which further contributes to his abusive of power image. We don't know what will happen in these two parties soon. CHP recently re-elected Kılıçdaroğlu unenthusiastically because there was no other real alternative to him in the party, and MHP seems stuck with Bahçeli. If Meral Akşener, a woman former MP from MHP, can make it to the leadership, she may have the potential to change MHP's face towards more moderate, liberal and relatively democratic directions. But we don't know if she would really push the party further in a positive way, if she could ever become the chair. We don't know if she could become the chair either, for that matter. A recent opinion piece on Aljazeera Turk says whatever happens, MHP will be further destroyed after the leadership crisis, which is quite likely. As a leftist in Turkey, I am sick of playing Pollyanna games of artificial happiness with the MHP.

**\* Recently, Ismail Kahraman – spokesman of Parliament – has said that Turkey should have a religious constitution. How much important this statement is? Which groups, individuals and currents have reacted – negative or positive – to this statement? This threat is somehow different from other Islamization projects of AKP, because it aims at transforming a secular political order into an Islamic one. How this threat can be repulsed?**

Yes, the TBMM Speaker said that. I'm not sure as to how come he decided to make that statement. Is it possible that someone above him like Erdoğan told him to do so, so that he could divert people's attention from the presidentialism component of the new civilian constitution debates? I don't really know. Now other figures from AKP are saying the opposite, that the new constitution will have secularism principle but it will be redefined in a more libertarian way, etc. Ruşen Çakır says there is a possibility that they try to incorporate both Islam and secularism to the new constitution, like an article that defines the society's religion as Islam and a separate article that defines the state as secular; so that Erdoğan becomes a popular candidate for both secular and conservative electorates in a possible referendum or early election. It's possible that this is a staged

political game, a soft sham fight to be played between anti-secularist ‘hardliners’ and Erdoğan the secularist-softliner presidential president.

Let us compare and contrast secularism understandings of the Kemalists during 1920s and Islamists and conservatives of today. Back in the 1920s, the understanding of secularism was sharp and black and white: there is science and there is religion. Science and religion don’t go together. In order to have progress for our peoples and state, we need to quit one of them (religion), and stick to the other (science), period. For this grand purpose, a lot of reforms were made during the Early Republican years (1920s-1930s). I will give you one strong example to show the secularist radicalism of the times: Darwinian evolution science and schemes were incorporated into school textbooks, while literary creationism was entirely discredited as non-scientific but only philosophy or theology (not science). The existing religious curriculum was removed altogether for the purpose of secularization of education. Gender—mixed school reform was made for boys and girls going to the same school. Of course, in addition to education, we can talk about removing the constitutional clauses that determined state (official) religion as Islam and incorporating secularism literally into the constitution. Closing down all religious institutions, banning all kinds of alternative religious education institutions and the like. This was an adaption of French de-Christianized secularism, a highly anti-clerical interpretation of separation of religion and politics (church and state, in the European and French contexts).

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Due to the heritage of this strict secularist understanding, the generations after the early Republican years have experienced this secular-religious fault line for years to come. The secularist Republican People’s Party (CHP) has championed the early Republican secularist values in their old-school, orthodox, Jacobin ways while the religious right-wing parties like National Salvation Party and Welfare Party have represented the anti-thesis of this understanding in its own aggressive manners. The center right, represented by parties like Demokrat Party (DP), Justice Party (AP), Motherland Party (ANAP) and True Party Party (DYP) have remained in between, not considered fully Islamic by the religious right and often blamed for being too accommodative towards religious fundamentalism by the left and CHP. In a way, as a successful amalgamation of the former secular center right and the former religious right, the AKP was successful in transforming the understanding of secularism in a more radical way than the former right-wing actors could do. When Abdullah Gül was the president, at some point, he mentioned his embrace of secularism by emphasizing the significance of secularism for different religious groups living together peacefully. This was first, a sincere embrace of secularism but also second, a significant re-interpretation of it: from old-school religion-science duality to an understanding like multiculturalism and religious diversity. Of course, whether or not he was sincere or only giving lip service to secularism could be a debate. One major litmus test for the religious right is

the Alevi issue in Turkey. So far, the AKP has showed no real, sincere attempt for officially recognizing Alevis as they are and accepting the equal status for Alevis to Sunnis. As HDP co-president Demirtaş once said, they (AKP elites) might be seeing Alevis as a heretic faith still, and not be willing to be recorded in history as a government that recognized the Alevi faith and identity. I don't believe the AKP will quit the theme of secularism, but they have changed it enough from the old-school interpretation to more ambiguous 'offshore waters'.

I believe if they can make a new civilian constitution, they will cite secularism but blend it together with religious concepts too. There might be references to both secularism and Islam. One journalist Abdülkadir Selvi even mentioned "love of Allah" in the new constitution, which would be too much to push for them but you never know what to expect. But I agree with the Ruşen Çakır that Turkey's most important issue is not secularism but the Kurdish question. And as long as the Kurdish question is not resolved, all other issues including secularism will remain secondary. Does that mean secularism should not be defended? Of course not. If Islamists re-define and re-interpret secularism in their narrow ways, secular progressives must do the same in much more progressive ways and put pressure on governments for not only a libertarian but also progressive secularism. In my view, the religious right and conservatives are always hypocritical about their defense of secularism and religious equality. They are often quite mono-religion-ist in essence. They take their own belief system as the center of the universe, and they see all other beliefs as inherently heretic or perverted, but these hypocrites are, at the same time, so 'open-minded', so 'welcoming', so full of 'humanly love' that they accept people of other religions and faiths with their 'grand tolerance', their 'grand condescension'. Apart from that, the conservatives and the religious right do nothing to support or equalize others in real legal or institutional terms. That's all bullshit. We need to tell these people that their belief systems are not superior, and we're all equals as humans regardless of what we believe or not believe.

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It's funny and ironic that a word like 'secular' is a negatively loaded word for the American right-wing, conservative Republican Party culture and terminology as well. Republican figures like Bill O'Reilly and Sandra Day O'Connor also use the term 'secular progressive' as a dirty word (like an equivalent of atheist or anti-clerical). For us the Kemalist generations, for the early Kemalist elites, secular progressivism was the norm, the 'normal', a natural part of what they called the 'Turkish Revolution'.

**\* Your article "Can the Kurdish Left Contribute to Turkey's Democratization" which its Persian translation was published by Problematika, was written in summer of 2014. Since then, we've seen some changes in Turkish politics, especially in AKP-Kurds relations. How do you explain these changes? Can the Kurdish Left still contribute to Turkey's Democratization? How?**

Yes, the Kurdish left is still the most democratic and politically aware movement in Turkey, and the People's Democracy Party (HDP) is the relatively most internally democratic party with its co-presidency, gender awareness and political correctness of party affairs. However, they are not perfect either, and they are in an unfortunate situation today for so many reasons. Many circles see the party's chances for a positive, constructive role a wasted opportunity but I still see or maybe I believe the party still has a potential to influence the future of Kurds and Turks in both the region and Turkey. HDP played the key role in the June 7, 2015 general elections by switching its electoral strategy from putting forward independent candidates to contesting as a party. It not only surpassed the 10 percent national electoral threshold for winning parliamentary seats, but it passed it much more than barely and decisively with around 13 percent of the national vote and 80 seats. It was heavily voted for by the Kurds, but a significant chunk of what we call 'white Turks' in metropolitan areas like Istanbul and Izmir also voted HDP for a variety of sincere, ideological and strategic reasons, i.e., to prevent from Erdoğan's growing power and his aspirations for a switch to a presidential system. Unfortunately, this electoral victory was overshadowed by a mutual strategy of tension escalation between Erdoğan/AKP government and the Kurdish guerilla actors, and eventually breakdown of the ceasefire between the Turkish armed forces and the PKK. There are so many reasons for this breakdown, including the ISIL attack on the Kurdish province of Kobanê, and the rise of Kurdish actors like YPG and PYD which in time gained international recognition in their fight against ISIL, and so on. But what happened eventually was a repeat election in November 1 the same year, and AKP got plurality of votes for a single-party government again, and HDP barely passed the 10 percent. In this inter-election season between June 7 and November 1, it was both AKP-Erdoğan and PKK-Kandil that mutually escalated tensions and violence, which caught HDP and squeezed it in the middle. Many people, who voted HDP as they believed it had the potential to evolve towards a peaceful party of Turkey, decided to stay away from HDP on November 1. Several Kurds could not vote due to extra-ordinary conditions in the east. And now, newspapers are talking about Erdoğan's and AKP government's serious intentions of removing some prominent HDP representatives' parliamentary immunity and having them tried in courts and incarcerated, which will even further increase tensions, conflict and violence. As we are doing this interview, a new bomb incident claimed a lot of lives and left tens wounded in Ankara, we don't know in full details yet, and some pro-Erdoğan newspapers are still using this incident for a propaganda of presidentialism, with no reasonable thinking, conscience or political correctness of any kind. However, I believe eventually, all this nonsense will go away and people will find their way for a stable peace, it's not a question of if but a question of when. I just don't know when. With AKP's and Erdoğan's increasing power and ambitions, peace feels quite distant for today. But as many people say with regard to Turkey's fast-changing political conditions over the days, "This is Turkey" (you never know).