

Glances on Turkey

Abdulhamid II and the Mobilization of History in Current Politics

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A few days ago, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced that Turkey's fourth drilling ship, to operate in the Black Sea gas fields, has been named after the Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II². The naming of the drilling ship after Abdulhamit II comes just after a recent spat between President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and IYI Party leader Meral Aksener on Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamit II's role in history and his cultural heritage in today's Turkey, is revealing of the might of the cultural war (Kulturkampf) that is waged along the lines of the ongoing deep polarization.

The burden of the past has emerged as a major component of Turkish current politics and is closely linked to the dominating populist discourse and its recurring nostalgia of a golden past, be it "Ottoman" or "Kemalist". Within this cultural war, government and opposition try to enhance legitimacy and gain a hegemonic position by reframing history, and by doing so they keep occupying the public debate with the past

Those who "love" Sultan Abdulhamid II and those who don't...

Meral Aksener was the first to make a reference to the Ottoman past in this spat, by using the term "istibdad", "despotism", a term dubbed by the Young Turks to describe the rule of Sultan Abdulhamid II (1876-1909) whom eventually they overthrew in 1908.

² <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/türkiye-to-start-transferring-gas-from-black-sea-in-early-2023-erdogan-57947>

Aksener made a parallelism between the revolt against Sultan Abdulhamit II in 1908 and the Gezi protests in June 2013. The latter protests started as a reaction against a governmental urban project to reform Gezi Park in Taksim, Istanbul, and subsequently evolved into a wider civil unrest against the perceived threats to personal and collective freedoms.

Slamming the court ruling that handed philanthropist Kavala and the other defendants of the Gezi case to aggravated life sentences while alluding to events in the late Ottoman Empire, she said that the chief issue today is to protect freedom in Turkey from the warped mentality of the government.

“Today, our main issue is to stand upright for freedom against tyranny. Because the spirit of Gezi has the same soul as [the revolt of] 1908 that resisted tyranny. Down with tyranny, long live freedom!”

However, for many Turkish Islamists, the 1908 Young Turk revolution and post-World War I creation of the secular Republic were themselves the work of world Jewry, Freemasons and a few weak-kneed Ottomans seduced by Europe’s wiles.

Some days later, President Erdogan, during his address at a meeting of AKP youth in the city of Adana, reacted harshly, saying that Sultan Abdulhamid II was a “nation lover” who has struggled with the imperialists and their collaborators inside the Empire throughout his life.

“Let someone salute the imperialists by likening the Gezi events to the overthrow of Abdulhamid Han; we will continue to walk in the footsteps of our ancestors”, he said.

And he continued:

“It is necessary to ask the lady who taunts Abdülhamid Sultan; insulting Sultan Abdulhamid, who ruled the Ottoman Empire, presented as a sick giant for 33 years, without losing an inch of land, is outrageous. And to those who go beyond this limit, this nation will show their limits in the 2023 elections. Ms. Meral, who are you to disrespect Sultan Abdulhamid?”³

After President Erdogan, Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of MHP and ally of Erdogan, was even clearer concerning those who “love” Abdulhamit II and those who do not.

Those who do not love Abdulhamid II, according to Bahçeli, are “the influence agents of the West nestled within us”; “Armenian gangsters (Çeteler) do not like Abdulhamid, Zionists do not like him, colonialists, spies, Turkish and Islamic enemies, do not like him at all”, he said.

Populist mobilization of Abdulhamid?

Mobilizing history is fitting to populist discourses and narratives, with Orban’s Hungary and Trump’s USA being the most noteworthy examples; Turkey is no exception to this global trend.

However, today’s Turkey seems “chained” to the past, with the government systematically trying to sustain the duality between Ottoman legacy and Kemalism. Therefore, nourishing and deepening the polarization between two “opponent” identities, the one that seeks its legitimacy from the Ottoman/Islamic

³ <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/turkiye/recep-tayyip-erdogan-meral-akseneri-hedef-aldi-sen-kim-abdulhamite-dil-uzatmak-kim-1938459>

past and Anatolia and the one that seeks its legitimacy from the Kemalist modernization and the “west”.

Ezgi Elçi⁴ argues that,

Populists aim to destroy the current status quo and ‘return to the past in one emotionally cathartic revolt’. Populists constitute a new ideology of home – a vision of the lost homeland – which represents nostalgia for a reconstructed past and, in turn, provides a sense of security against the perceived loss of identity). Golden ages are crucial for populists because they provide sources of political legitimacy for the present, along with the rhetoric of authority and authenticity against troublesome changes, crises, or decline.

According to Elçi, Ottoman nostalgia can be summarized as discourse and actions “on the past, intended to legitimize contemporary neoliberal and cultural policies by drawing on anachronistic reinterpretations and the glorification of the Ottoman past in Turkey”.

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire corresponds to the absence of home. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has referred to verses of his favorite poet, Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, ‘the people are odd and a pariah in his own homeland’, because they no longer live under the authentic Ottoman rule but the secular, modern Turkish Republic). Ottoman nostalgia reflects resentment towards the Republican elites, as it serves as a tool for revealing, transforming and mobilizing the desires, ambitions and anger of the Islamist masses.

⁴Ezgi Elçi, Politics of Nostalgia and Populism: Evidence from Turkey, British Journal of Political Science (2021), page 1 of 18

Michael Reynolds⁵ argues that,

Although for Davutoğlu and the AKP the last decades of the Ottoman Empire are a tale of tragedy and collapse, they do find in the period a hero and role model: the deposed sultan, Abdulhamid II. The esteem the AKP holds for the sultan is unusual (...) Where conventional Turkish historiography condemns Abdulhamid for being a paranoid ruler more concerned to build up his autocratic regime and suppress opposition than overhaul the empire's structures and rejuvenate its strength, Davutoğlu hails Abdulhamid as a visionary statesman.

During the last long period of AKP's governments, Abdulhamid has gradually entered public discourse but also public imagination, mainly through a steady process of "rehabilitation", but also a process of likening the period of his rule and the challenges that he was facing with the current period of President Erdogan.

Turkish television series "Payitaht Abdülhamid", first airing on February 24, 2017 by state-broadcaster TRT, brought Abdulhamid II in almost every Turkish household, multiplying the effect of his "rehabilitation" and the likening of his period with the current period of Turkey.

Mustafa Akyol⁶ writes that Abdulhamid II was an authoritarian ruler, heavily opposed by most Ottoman intellectuals of his time. His career had actually begun by proclaiming the first Ottoman Constitution and assembling the first elected Ottoman parliament in 1876. However, in less than two years, in the midst of a

⁵ <https://www.hudson.org/research/11595-the-key-to-the-future-lies-in-the-past-the-worldview-of-erdo-an-and-davuto-lu>

⁶ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/09/turkey-reviving-sultan-abdulhamid-ii.html>

disastrous war with Russia, Abdulhamid II suspended the constitution and closed the parliament for the next three decades.

And he argues that,

“[The] authoritarian legacy of Abdulhamid II seems to be one of the key themes underlined by supporters of Erdogan. Erdogan, they say, is also authoritarian, but for all the right reasons: Turkey is facing lethal threats, and a strong leader must guide the nation without caring what his liberal or foreign critics say”.

Revealing of the efforts to draw similarities between Abdulhamid and his period and Erdogan and today’s Turkey is the article by the Turkish historian Ebubekir Sofuoğlu, published in the pro-government daily Sabah already in June 2015⁷ arguing the there is a serious similarity between the attacks against Abdulhamid and the attacks against Erdogan.

“There are serious similarities between the internal and external related efforts to dethrone Abdulhamid, and the efforts to make President Erdoğan lose power. The first similarity was that in this period, just as unofficial organizations that seemed to be from the far right to the far left, even Islamist, could unite in the opposition of Erdoğan, the common point of the Ottoman Intellectuals and even Islamists, from the most Westernist to the most conservative, was that they were united in opposition to Abdulhamid”.

It seems that, as long as the Turkish political elites, supporters and opponents of President Erdogan and AKP alike, will not be able to free themselves from the

⁷ <https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2015/06/25/secmen-bu-oyunu-farketti-ak-partinin-oyu-yuzde-44e-cikti>

burdens of the past and continue to mobilize history, it will be difficult for Turkey to overcome the current polarization.