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TURKEY'S "CULTURE WARS": a post-election analysis



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The deeper plot that lies beneath the results of 14–28 May double elections and Turkey's fateful slip into authoritarianism is one of "culture wars".

The culture wars perspective reminds us that background factors such as nationalism and Islam explain little in and of themselves. They are part of the symbolic framework which makes particular political arrangements possible and acceptable.

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Was it the butler?

Political commentaries can be like murder mysteries. There is a crime to be solved (unexpected election results, say); several suspects (politicians, institutions, the masses); a gathering in remote settings (exotic countries, inner cities and brutish rural areas); and a detective (the foreign journalist, the pundit or the expert) charged with the task of finding the culprit.

A successful murder mystery grabs the reader's attention from the get-go, convincing them that they could solve the crime on their own. But "the author must play fair with the reader", writes American art critic and mystery novelist S.S. Van Dine in his widely cited *"Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories"*. "He must outwit the reader, and hold the reader's interest, through sheer ingenuity."

Originally published in 1928, at the height of the *golden age of mystery writing*, Van Dine's short article is considered to be one of the key texts in the critical study of detective fiction. There are very definite laws for the writing of detective stories, he tells us, that every "respectable and self-respecting" author needs to follow. The most remarkable of these is rule number 11 which states: "Servants—such as butlers, footmen, valets, game-keepers, cooks, and the like—must not be chosen by the author as the culprit. It is a too easy solution. It is unsatisfactory, and makes the reader feel that his time has been wasted."

Judging by these standards, most commentaries on the results of the recent elections in Turkey would have flunked the test. And yet for reasons that are difficult to fathom, mainstream media and Western think tanks never tire of running the same hackneyed clichés or tedious Orientalist tropes about nationalism, Islam and democracy, election after election.

Expect no clever plot twists or complicated characters. In Turkey, we are told, institutions do not matter, civil society is non-existent or is silenced, political culture is obedient, and the masses have no agency. Whether draped in the colours of the national flag or cloaked under a religious veil, it is always the butler.

The 14–28 May double elections—which extended President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rule into a third decade with more than 52 percent of the 64m votes cast—were no exception. "In Turkey's elections, nationalism is the real winner", Al-Jazeera told its readers. "Nationalism is 'definitely a winner' in Turkey's presidential elections", France 24 declared. "Turkey's recent presidential and parliamentary elections are widely seen as demonstrating the rising tide of nationalism in the country", the BBC surmised.

As always, the culprit had an accomplice or co-plotter but, once again, it was one that left little room for imagination. “[Erdogan Looks to Islamist Fringe to Bolster Electoral Alliance](#)”, Bloomberg informed us. “[Arab Islamists Rally Behind Erdoğan In Upcoming Turkish Election Deemed ‘Battle Between Islam And Unbelief’](#)”, wrote The Middle East Media Research Institute.

The problem with “the butler did it” theories of Turkish elections is not that nationalism or Islam played no role in the outcome. Obviously, they did. They always do. Much like the proverbial criminal butler, they are always there, part of the scenery, one suspect among many but certainly not the most likely. To blame rampant nationalism or unbridled Islamism for the many failings of Turkish democracy is nothing but an anti-climax, and a glaring sign of lazy journalism, the pundit’s ineptitude and lack of originality.

To solve the mystery and identify the real culprit, we must peer behind the facade and uncover the deeper plot at work.

Turkey’s culture wars are nothing new. They started long before the Turkish Republic was founded in 1923 and continue until today. Some call them a tug-of-war between secularism and Islam; others talk about a long-running dispute between centre and periphery; still others, about a clash between tradition and modernity. But these labels fail to capture the full complexity of the split.

Turkey’s culture wars

The deeper plot that lies beneath Turkey’s current woes and its endless waltz with authoritarianism is one of “culture wars”. I use the term “culture” in the sense that American sociologist James Davison Hunter defined it in his influential 1991 book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, as moral ideals, rival interpretations of the good and “how the good is grounded and legitimated”. Oddly enough, despite its widespread use in current debates on issues of identity and politics, few people are aware of the origins of the concept of “culture wars”, as I showed in my recent book, *Cancelled: The Left Way Back from Woke*. One reason for this is the exclusively American focus of Hunter’s discussion.

The key contention of the culture war thesis is the belief that there had been a fundamental realignment

of American public culture, one that played out not just on the surface of social life or at the level of ideology but affected all major institutions—from special interest organisations and political parties to competing media outlets and professional associations, and the elites who lead these institutions. “The culture war does not manifest itself at all times in all places in the same way”, Hunter says. “It is episodic and, very often, local in its expressions.” I believe that the framework of analysis proposed by Hunter is helpful in understanding societal conflicts in other contexts too — not only in the US or the English-speaking world, and certainly not limited to post-material, identity-related issues.

Turkey’s culture wars are nothing new. They started long before the Turkish Republic was founded in 1923 and continue until today under different guises and with varying degrees of intensity. Some call them a tug-of-war between secularism and Islam; others talk about a long-running dispute between centre and periphery; still others, about a clash between tradition and modernity. But these labels fail to capture the full complexity of the split, for the fault lines cut across conventional divisions along political, economic and sociocultural lines.

Hunter’s idea is more useful than contending conceptual tools in at least three ways. First, it invites us to see the competing understandings of reality that lie beneath mundane policy disputes or institutional crises. The 2023 earthquakes that claimed the lives of more than 50,000 people or the unstoppable depreciation of the Turkish lira mean different things for those who stand on different sides of the culture war.

Various polls have shown that support for Erdoğan’s party the AKP was more or less intact in cities worst hit by the earthquake. More than half of the voters either did not hold the government responsible for the deepening cost-of-living crisis, or believed that **only Erdoğan can fix the economy**. This also tells us that a narrow focus on electoral campaigns or policy platforms goes only so far to explain voters’ decision-making processes. We can argue all we want about the political miscalculations of the opposition — the presidential candidate could have been announced earlier; Kılıçdaroğlu was the wrong choice; the smaller parties that were part of the opposing coalition played an outsize role; the election campaign was too short, too vague, focused on the wrong themes, and so on and so forth. The truth is, we do not know. This is all speculation, and we cannot claim that the outcome would have been different had another strategy been pursued.

Second, the culture wars idea shows us how important elites are in shaping the framework of people's commitments. When he revisited his earlier arguments in 2006, Hunter stressed that this is not simply a matter of noisy extremists shouting in the dark. The elites are the ones who provide the concepts and define the meaning of public symbols. When Erdoğan waved a prayer rug in a campaign rally, he knew that the crowd would react and boo his rival Kılıçdaroğlu, an Alevi of Kurdish origins who had accidentally stepped on one with his shoes during an *iftar* gathering. The truth value of such overtly absurd statements as "if the opposition wins, they'll let people marry animals" matters little so long as they produce an alternate reality and manage to evoke fear. Hunter is aware, of course, that the majority of the population are not invested in culture wars as much as the elites and tend to be more moderate and less motivated. But when issues are framed in such stark terms, public choices are forced. In other words, when push comes to shove, most — even those in the middle — make a choice.

This is also because — and this is the third advantage of using the culture war approach — the moral visions offered by contending elites become meaningful only in relation to an "other" that helps to clarify the boundaries of the respective groups, in line with the dynamics of collective identity formation. The choices people make are a means to reassert their collective identity, often in the face of what is perceived as an existential threat. This was what the opposition candidate Kılıçdaroğlu wanted to tap into when he embarked on a polarising campaign between the two rounds, talking about sending Syrian refugees back or protecting women from Erdoğan's new coalition partners, notably Hüdâ-Par with its alleged links to Kurdish Hezbollah, or the Islamic fundamentalist New Welfare Party. Similarly, Erdoğan wanted to delegitimise his opponent by portraying him as a stooge of the Kurdish militant group PKK. And it was not only the elites. Anyone who spent a couple of hours on Turkish Twitter the night before the second round of the elections would have noticed the emotional rift keeping the two sides of the culture war apart. When it was announced that Turkish actress Merve Dizdar had won the Best Actress Award at the Cannes Film Festival, Kılıçdaroğlu supporters interpreted this as the stars finally aligning, while Erdoğan faithfuls lashed out at Dizdar for dedicating her award to her "sisters who never give up hope no matter what and to all the rebellious souls in Turkey who are waiting for the good days they deserve".

Türkiye

In the end, the stars tricked the proponents of change once again, and Erdoğan chalked up his umpteenth victory against a weary opposition. Polarisation subsided almost overnight, at least on the surface, and journalists, pundits and experts began to see the veteran strongman in a new light, portraying him as a benevolent *pater familias* who was showing signs of mellowing as his new, "moderate" cabinet indicated. But we know that this truce is illusory. In fact, as Hunter notes, this narrative of consensus is dangerous, for it entails the denial of historically significant differences. The culture wars perspective enables us to move beyond issue-based analyses and focus on the normative conflict that underpins these crises. It also reminds us that background factors such as nationalism and Islam explain little in and of themselves. They are part of the symbolic framework that makes particular political arrangements possible and acceptable. As party ideology or policy choices are less important than the deeper normative conflict, alliances are formed and dissolved in a heartbeat; promises are made and broken; and politics is trapped in a spiral of emotions.

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In Turkey's case, it would not be wrong to say that the Rubicon has already been crossed. The Kemalist project was successful in creating a modern state out of the remnants of the crumbling Ottoman Empire, but it failed in creating a nation united by a sense of shared past and common destiny. From the outset, the founders of the republic were distrustful of the people whose sovereignty they were supposed to represent or express. The imperative of building and consolidating a strong modern state, as well as the memories of the disintegrative effect (at least perceived as such by the republican elite) of Ottoman experiments with parliamentary politics in 1876 and 1908, respectively, meant that modernisation was going to be selective and driven from above. This entailed a state acting not as an arbitrary institution or as an expression of various class interests, but as an active agent that while purportedly taking its inspiration from the feelings and aspirations of the nation, would shape and reshape it to

“elevate” it to the level of contemporary (read Western) civilisation. This envisaged a strenuous process of social engineering, to enlighten the people so to speak and save them from the clutches of tradition, and the establishment of formally democratic, but in essence authoritarian, political institutions that would safeguard the unity and modernisation of Turkey.

Erdoğan’s post-Kemalist “New Turkey”— **recently crowned “Türkiye”** by the United Nations — was no more successful in creating a sense of unity than its predecessor. In fact, the name change itself was more than a move to rebrand Turkey and represented an attempt to mask the failure of the two decades-long process of transforming Turkey into a model for the Middle East — a process, we should add, that was encouraged by the West. It was none other than George W. Bush, the 43rd President of the United States, who charted the course in **a speech he delivered** during an official visit to Turkey on June 29, 2004:

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“This land has always been important for its geography — here at the meeting place of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Now Turkey has assumed even greater historical importance, because of your character as a nation. Turkey is a strong, secular democracy, a majority Muslim society, and a close ally of free nations. Your country, with 150 years of democratic and social reform, stands as a model to others, and as Europe’s bridge to the wider world. Your success is vital to a future of progress and peace in Europe and in the broader Middle East.”

In retrospect, the optimism that marked Bush’s speech may seem like wishful thinking, the product of an unwitting or deliberate misrecognition of the various challenges the country faced internally and externally. But this was by no means a foregone conclusion. There were times, in particular in the first, “pragmatic”, phase of AKP rule, which lasted roughly until 2010, when hopes for the peaceful accommodation of diversity were higher, brief moments of respite when the will for a truly democratic system was stronger. Emboldened by a series of electoral victories, a self-confident AKP even launched an initiative to resolve the country’s longstanding Kurdish problem, the so-called “democratic opening”

process, which lasted in fits and starts until the beginning of 2015. True, the reforms the state undertook were more cosmetic than concrete; the process itself top-down, opaque and subject to the whims of two strongmen, Erdoğan and Abdullah Öcalan, the incarcerated leader of the PKK. Yet the ceasefire between Turkish armed forces and the PKK lasted more than two years, and many believed that the process was irreversible, whatever the (real) intentions of the actors involved.

These hopes were dashed in 2013, when a peaceful sit-in held by environmental activists to counter government plans to raze the Gezi Park in the symbolic Taksim Square escalated into a country-wide protest movement that was brutally suppressed by the state and its security apparatus. Simmering tensions between the government and other contenders for power led to a failed coup attempt by a small clique within the Turkish army on July 15, 2016, leaving 241 dead and an even stronger “strongman”. A state of emergency that gave extra powers to the president was declared, and it was followed by an immense wave of arrests and detentions that extended far beyond those individuals allegedly linked to the Gülen movement, led by Erdoğan’s one-time ally and the “mastermind” behind the putsch according to the official narrative.

It is commonplace to explain the collapse of the Turkish model by referring to the return of religion or a fundamental incompatibility between Islam and democracy. But this does not capture the continuity between Kemalist and post-Kemalist Turkey. Erdoğan’s unabashedly Islamist regime has more affinities with the modern-secular nation-state Mustafa Kemal and his associates tried to build than its proponents are prepared to admit. It is authoritarian, anti-pluralist, based on a notion of strong leadership and the personality cult that goes with it. It is true that Erdoğan tried to reconfigure Turkey as a regional powerhouse, and the potential leader of the (Sunni) Muslim world. But this project was bound to fail in the absence of a commitment to shared values. Turkey has always been (and still is) an archipelago of communities held together by fiat and, when necessary, by force. Unity is predicated upon a strong, paternalist state, one that values communities, above all family, tribe and clan (*aşiret*), over individuals and civil society. This paternalist state is not egalitarian; it does not tend to increase social welfare or protect individuals or groups against encroachments on their rights and entitlements. On the contrary, it is perceived as and acts like a “father” presiding over a hierarchical structure that promotes a form of communalism akin to the *millet* system of the Ottoman Empire.

The transition to full autocracy was rapid and easy, because Turkey does not have a unified society held together by an overarching moral vision; because each community is ready to form an alliance with the state to further its own interests, turning a blind eye to the predicament of other communities, and most notably of minorities; because overcoming autocracy requires resistance, but the various communities that form the archipelago despise one another as much as, if not more than, they despise autocrats; because for every community, including that of the oppressed, the only route to salvation is to nurture a leader from among its own ranks and to replace the autocrat with its own, thereby taking control of the state mechanism.

Sadly, as it prepares to celebrate its centenary, the republic remains bitterly divided into several mutually hostile communities that would rather go their own merry way than to coexist together. Whether Turkey can survive this and make it to another centenary is a mystery that not even the best detectives could easily solve, whether they stick Van Dine's rules or not.