

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Viewpoint
Civil Society Confronts Authoritarianism
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Stanford Social Innovation Review
Summer 2018

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VIEWPOINT

Civil Society Confronts Authoritarianism

My experience in Erdoğan's Turkey has taught me that NGOs need to avoid polarizing politics, focus on core values, and find allies to survive and thrive in closing societies.

BY BATUHAN AYDAGÜL

On the morning of November 4, 2002, Turkey woke up to a major upheaval in its political system. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), a new spin-off from the flag-bearer movement of political Islam in Turkey, unexpectedly won the majority power in the national parliament, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, AKP's head, rose to prime minister.

Immediately following the 2002 elections, the stars seemed to align for Turkish civil society. AKP adopted a democratic agenda during its early years in power and passed a series of major reforms to bring the country's democracy in line with European Union standards. Among those reforms, the new laws on associations (2004) and on foundations (2008) aimed at improving the legal scaffolding of civil society. These laws removed many restrictions imposed on civil-society organizations by the military regime in the early 1980s. This positive political trend also enabled Turkish civil society to diversify: Alevi, feminist, Islamist or conservative, Kurdish or pro-Kurdish, LGBTI, rights-based, and Roma civil society expanded in numbers and strengthened in institutional capacity and visibility.

Fast-forward to 2018, and the legal and political climate for Turkish civil society has completely deteriorated. AKP and now-President Erdoğan have governed the country under a state of emergency after the government survived a coup attempt in July 2016 during which 248 people, including 180 civilians, were killed by the plotters. Under the state of emergency, AKP has issued 30 executive orders, exempt from judicial processes, to

purge a total of 114,279 individuals from public service and shut down a total of 1,424 associations and 145 foundations by the end of 2017.

This aggressive clampdown has also targeted human rights, peace, and Kurdish and pro-Kurdish activists in civil society and higher education. After academicians published a declaration to denounce the increasing violence in Southeast Anatolia, 312 signatories were fired without any social security protection and are now on trial in court. Taner Kılıç, the Turkey chair for Amnesty International, and Osman Kavala, one of Turkey's most prominent businessmen and civil-society activists, are just two among many citizens who have been jailed. Turkey has been judged "not conducive for civil society development" by the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law.



Turkish liberal democracy is in free fall. According to Freedom House, Turkey's total scores on freedom, political rights, and civil liberties have plunged from 60 (out of 100) in 2014 to 32 in 2018, making Turkey "Not Free" and joining the likes of Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, and Iran.

How does civil society survive in closing societies? My experience working on education policy in Turkey as well as my awareness of the history of social change globally have taught me that progress will be slow and possibly painful. Most civil-society institutions are political by nature but must be careful to avoid being drawn into the schemes that illiberal regimes use to politicize and polarize perceived opponents. It is also crucial to cultivate solidarity and cooperation with like-minded organizations to maximize impact and to seek dialogue with individuals within the government or NGOs perceived as pro-governmental to promote values that transcend party politics, such as quality education.

THE PIOUS YOUTH

I graduated from Stanford Graduate School of Education, with a master's degree in international education policy and administration, in 2002—the year AKP took power. When I arrived at Stanford, I intended

to stay in the United States and work for a few years after graduation. However, AKP's election and the prospect of joining a think tank on education to practice my newly acquired skills during this critical juncture in Turkish history provided a challenge too intriguing not to pursue. Though surprised by the political turn, I remained optimistic that it could provide Turkey an opportunity to reconcile its historical fears of Islamism and to consolidate its democracy, hobbled by the military-imposed constitution since 1982.

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Around the time I graduated from Stanford, professors Tosun Terzioğlu and Üstün Ergüder were about to launch the Education Reform Initiative (ERI), a new think tank in Istanbul dedicated to K-12 education, through collaboration with the Open Society Foundations, Sabancı University in Istanbul, and the Mother Child Education Foundation (AÇEV)—a civil-society organization that delivers educational programs for children, parents, and young women in need across the country. Ergüder recruited me to work at ERI in March 2003.

The Ministry of National Education (MoNE) was then pursuing a much-needed curriculum reform, prioritizing girls' schooling and expanding enrollments for disadvantaged students. Crucial for this effort, the government was also opening civic space for dialogue on this reform and demonstrating an interest in evidence. The State Planning Organization, the government's policy planning shop that later became the Ministry of Development, commissioned the World Bank to assess Turkish education and provide a blueprint for drafting a new strategy. The "Education Sector Study," published by the World Bank in association with ERI in 2005, was a product of research papers and consultation with stakeholders. The burgeoning national support for girls' schooling was driving female enrollments up, so we wanted to investigate attendance rates. Our research showed that school dropouts were a problem—not just girls but also boys. Our subsequent policy advocacy successfully influenced MoNE to monitor and increase attendance in the following years.

Eventually, ERI managed to be widely recognized as an objective and independent voice on education policies in Turkey. In 2009, the Minister of National Education stated that ERI served like a mirror to the Ministry, objectively reflecting both its positive and negative aspects equally.

But this positive outlook changed after then-Prime Minister Erdoğan stated in 2012 that "we want to raise a pious youth." This about-face came just as MoNE was about to commit to improving poor learning

outcomes, Turkey's chronic policy challenge, by adopting a national strategy for teachers. Since then, education policy has been entirely politicized, way beyond the give-and-take between education and politics that is customary in most states.

The biggest setback has been diversion of resources, financial and bureaucratic, away from Turkey's immediate education challenges. For example, the Ministry only adopted the national teacher strategy in June 2017, five years later than originally planned. After the coup attempt in 2016, MoNE limited participation by civil society groups on the basis of whether an organization is pro-government, supports AKP-approved education policies, and shares the same cultural values as the ruling party about schooling, children, family, and gender roles.

IRREDUCIBLY PLURAL

Though MoNE has grown less tolerant of ERI's critical voice, we have experienced a relatively trouble-free period, thanks partly to steps we have taken. The appropriate response to such trying circumstances is investing in social capital: networking and bonding with like-minded groups and building bridges with other, heterogeneous groups on shared priorities.

At ERI, our mission of "contributing to systemic transformation of education" focused our attention in the new political reality. Our core values—sound evidence, constructive dialogue, and critical thinking—were especially handy within our new ecosystem because some stakeholders still valued data, dialogue was needed even more, and critical thinking enabled us to think beyond the mainstream politicized debates. More important, uniting around this core ideology helped us bond with our funders, board, team, and close allies as a community and become more resilient.

When facing the pressures of undemocratic regimes, civil-society organizations should keep in mind that society is irreducibly plural. What holds for society also holds for public agencies: They are not monolithic, no matter how much the ruling party tries

to give that impression. Allies and common ground can be found and should be carefully cultivated. So while we found that our window of opportunity for influencing policy decision at the top narrowed, we still maintained effective policy advocacy through generating and communicating evidence to policy makers. As it turned out, bureaucrats needed practical advice and sound data, even when education policy was utterly politicized from above.

When we asked how we could best promote the systemic transformation of education while the window of influencing macro policy shut down, we decided to direct some of our resources to reaching out to teachers and parents, the lifeblood of the education system. We knew that teachers were able to make a positive difference in education despite all other adverse conditions, and it was essential that they have support. So we invested in discovering an innovative and contemporary approach to support teachers and partnered with ATÖLYE, a transdisciplinary innovation platform for community building, to research, design, and develop a new idea.

The result is the Teachers Network, a platform that aspires to empower teachers through collective leadership and impact. Six of Turkey's leading foundations collectively fund and support the Teachers Network, a rare instance of collaboration in the country's philanthropic scene. Though the Network is still in its infancy, its most significant achievement has been enabling teachers to reclaim their agency within a highly centralized and hierarchical ecosystem, to identify and solve problems in their schools and unite with like-minded peers.

I remain a realistic optimist. I assume that this period, marked by the global retreat of liberal democracies, will last for some time and unfortunately cause suffering to many people. However, I also believe in our potential to reverse this retrogression. By being pragmatic, we can preserve our civil-society institutions today so that they can do their invaluable work in rebuilding inclusive, equitable, and rights-based democracy well into the future. ■