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'Democracy's Challenge with Turkey' debated in Abant Platform



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A select group of leading intellectuals, politicians and journalists issued a joint declaration over the weekend decrying the authoritarian policies in Turkey, concluding that a desire for a strong autocratic government by one man remains the fundamental challenge.

"Our democracy has been experiencing one of the deepest crises in its history," the draft communiqué stated, stressing that the main reason for turbulence in the country is one man's unrelenting efforts to set up an autocratic regime in Turkey.

"Turkey risks facing an authoritarian majoritarian governance," it noted.

The Abant Platform, a prominent discussion forum known for dealing with pressing issues that have faced Turkey since 1998, tackled challenges on the rule of law, politicized judiciary, Kurdish problem and fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and assembly, and the right to dissent.

Organized by the Journalists and Writers Foundation (GYV), a civic organization championing the principles of diversity, multiculturalism and dialogue, the Abant Platform held its 34th meeting, titled "Democracy's Challenge with Turkey," at the Gazelle Winter Resort in Bolu province Jan. 30-31.

The participants, most of whom are well-known intellectuals from all walks of life, agreed on the absence of appropriate conditions for drafting a modern constitution, warning that a new charter will only serve to provide legitimacy for the one-man rule.

"The [drafting process for the] new constitution is being used as a vehicle to deliver a dictatorship under the banner of 'Turkish style presidency'," the statement said, according to the draft version seen by Today's Zaman.

Veteran professor of constitutional law and former member of the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe Ergun Özbudun said the conditions for making a new constitution no longer exist in Turkey.

Özbudun, who had been intimately involved in attempts to draft a constitution for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party) government, underlined that Turkey has the technical expertise to make a constitution but said the political commitment to strong checks and balances is lacking.

According to Özbudun, the government in Turkey at the moment desires a "personalistic rule deprived of all checks and balances," by asking for a switch to a presidential system. He also mentioned public opinion polls in which people are against the presidential system in the country.

Stating that this government has eliminated judicial independence in



Print



Turkey, Professor Özbudun expressed his concern over the separation of powers in the suggested executive presidential system. Many AK Party officials have been referring to the system they would like to introduce as a "Turkish-style presidential system," the details of which are unknown to the public.

The Abant Platform witnesses an extensive participation from a wide range of scholars, civil society representatives, journalists and politicians. Former Minister of Foreign Affairs Yakar Yakış, former Minister of Tourism and Culture Ertuğrul Günay, author Perihan Mağden, Ankara-based Center of Law, Ethics and Political Studies (HESA) President İbrahim Cerrah, columnist and professor Mehmet Altan were among the guests. Representatives from the opposition Republican People's Party, pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), Alevi and minority groups also attended the free-flowing debates.

Journalists raise press freedom woes

Journalists were among those who attended the discussions, underlining the sad state of press freedoms in Turkey, with many journalists jailed, investigated and prosecuted because of their critical views of the government. Abdülhamit Bilici, the editor-in-chief of Zaman, Said Sefa, editor-in-chief of the Turkish news portal Haberdar; Ömer Laçiner, editor-in-chief of Birikim magazine; Mihail Vassiliadis, editor-in-chief of Greek daily Apoyevmatini; Ünal Tanık, editor-in-chief of the online news site Rota Haber; and Mehmet Aysan, editor-in-chief of Baro Türk magazine were all participants.

The platform noted that when the media is under intense pressure and many journalists are incarcerated for their views and writing, it is impossible to chart a path for a new constitution in Turkey. It said the government has already undermined freedoms and rights protected by the current constitution and trampled the rule of law. It concluded that the renewed call for drafting a new constitution is not sincere under the circumstances.

Abdullah Abdülkadiroğlu, Ankara bureau chief of the Samanyolu Network, Namık Çınar, columnist for the Taraf daily, Mehmet Celal Başlangıç, a columnist at news portal Diken.com, Yavuz Baydar, a columnist for Today's Zaman and the T24 news portal, Ali Bulaç, columnist for Zaman, Pelin Cengiz, columnist at news portal Haberdar.com and Today's Zaman, Aydın Engin, columnist at the Cumhuriyet daily, Reuters correspondent Ömer Faruk Gergerlioğlu, columnist at T24 and former head of the Association of Human Rights and Solidarity for Oppressed Peoples (MAZLUM-DER) and many others also joined in the discussions.

Extraordinary period in Turkey

Reha Çamuroğlu, moderator of one of the first panel discussions on Saturday, stated that Turkey is going through an "extraordinary period" that is not likely to end in an ordinary way. Writer and scholar Murat Belge defined the current period in Turkey as "frightening," while citing examples from President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's instructions to local governors to disregard official regulations.

Placing responsibility on the elites of the country, columnist for Zaman and Today's Zaman Şahin Alpay said Turkey now is encountering a tutelary system backed by the people who replaced the military tutelage.

In the Abant Platform meeting, the representative of each group in society tended to express grievances with the state in Turkey. Vassiliadis said the state applied a policy of elimination against non-Muslims in the country.

Kurds, on the other hand, such as HDP Diyarbakır deputy İmam Taşçier, listed the Kurdish question as the number one challenge for democracy in Turkey, while calling for "collective rights" for Kurds. Another Kurdish politician, Hüda Kaya, urged everyone to pay attention to the atrocities in the Southeast while warning that the violence will soon spread to the west unless people react to the ongoing issues.

A large group of journalists who have been targeted by the government were in attendance at the meeting. TV journalist Tark Toros, who was the editor-in-chief of Bugün TV, which was taken over by the government while on the air in October, complained about the lack of solidarity among different segments of society in Turkey when it comes to defending the rights of others.

Feb. 28 mentality is still in charge in Turkey

Another sacked journalist, Nazlı Ilıcak, directed attention to the ongoing "witch hunt" against the Hizmet, or Gülen, movement and rejected the assumption that the movement had been an ally of the government. "Whoever is the government is responsible for mistakes in the past," Ilıcak said in reference to the mishaps in some of the controversial legal cases regarding soldiers during the last decade.

Professor of law Serap Yazıcı, on the other hand, argued that those who conducted the Feb. 28 post-modern coup in 1997 are still effective and in charge because "they choose to use the 'National View' [the root of the AK Party] instead of fighting against it."

Majoritarian dictatorship is in the making

Political scientist Baskın Oran argued that Erdoğan has been establishing the dictatorship of the majority, thanks to the popular support he receives. "He has created the Islamist version of the nation state," Oran pointed out while adding that the people in Turkey are learning how to struggle against an evil that emerged from the ballot box.

Another political scientist and former Republican People's Party (CHP) deputy, Binnaz Toprak, like many other participants referred to the political culture and said genuinely liberal ideas have never taken root in Turkey.

Final declaration of 34th Abant Platform

The Abant Platform's 34th meeting, titled "Democracy's Challenge with Turkey," took place in the province of Bolu on Jan. 30-31.

Participants expressed their views freely as there was a free and multi-vocal environment at the gathering. Those present voiced a variety of views on Turkey's most crucial problems. The issues below were freely discussed at the meeting, which was held in three sessions.

1. Our democracy has been undergoing one of the deepest crises in its history. This crisis is speedily using up humanitarian, moral and conscientious values and laying the ground for the settlement of unlawfulness and one man's rule in the country.
2. Although we believe a new constitution is necessary, an attempt to write a new constitution will only work to legitimize one man's rule under these circumstances [in the country]. The [drafting process for the] new constitution is being used as a vehicle to deliver a dictatorship under the banner of a "Turkish-style presidency."
3. A democratic, civilized, tolerant environment for public debate necessary for the drafting of the new constitution no longer exists in Turkey. A democratic constitution cannot be written under the current circumstances in the country when the rules of the current Constitution are explicitly violated, fundamental rights and freedoms have been suspended, journalists are sent to prison due to their news reports and judges are jailed due to the verdicts they issue. The call for the drafting of a new constitution by such a mentality is not found as sincere given the fact that it violates the current Constitution and shows no respect for the laws.
4. The required conceptual and political ground for a switch to the presidential system, which is being imposed [on the society] by the government, is insufficient in Turkey. There are efforts to make a switch to the presidential system a fait accompli. There is no way out for Turkey other than a pro-freedom, participatory parliamentary democracy in which the election system and structures of political parties have been strengthened through democratization.
5. There is no chance of democratic reconciliation in an environment in which the society has been polarized for the sake of the formation of authoritarianism, different culture and belief groups have been made enemies of one another, social peace has been disrupted, no security of life and property has remained due to arbitrary practices, and the right to property is disregarded.
6. The government aims to yield political results by abusing Turkey's sensitive problems such as those related to different ethnicities and beliefs.

This situation makes problems even worse and their solution nearly impossible.

7. We are passing through a period during which everyone who is deemed an opponent of the government is shown as a target through the media and subjected to defamation and attacks. These efforts show that the "internal enemy" concept which we have been criticizing through our democratization processes for decades has returned to our lives again.

8. It is of utmost importance for different groups in society to be sensitive to one another's problems and demands for democracy to take root in the country. In a social structure where everyone cares for their own problems and demands, it becomes easy for pro-tutelage structures to emerge while the area of mobility narrows.

9. Civilians have been sustaining damage, they are forced to be displaced and our legacy of ancient culture is being exterminated in the country's Southeast, mainly in Sur and Cizre, where multifaceted violence, rooted in the Kurdish problem, rages on. The method for the solution of the Kurdish problem is not through armed struggle and violence; the escalation of violence [in the region] benefits neither the region's people nor democracy. Furthermore, it nourishes the growing authoritarianism [in the country].

10. The [principle of] separation of powers, one of the fundamental elements in democratic regimes, means the judiciary's independence from the legislative and executive [organs] in particular. A series of laws [enacted] over the past years and the establishment of penal courts of peace in particular have led to the significant violation of the fundamental principles of a [fair] trial and a judiciary has been created that is under government control.

11. Turkey will get out of this extraordinary situation only by emphasizing the supremacy of the law and democracy. Impositions other than these are never acceptable.

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