

The Retreat of Turkey's Trade Unions in a Neoliberal Era

Turkey has been in the international news for many unfortunate reasons over the last several years. Though the Justice and Development Party (AKP) currently in power was initially touted internationally as the voice for moderate Islamic parties in the Middle East that praise has dwindled. Since 2002 the AKP has been in power and the party's de facto leader is current president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Pluralism and democratic values have gradually weakened but after a July 2016 coup attempt the AKP initiated an authoritarian style crackdown across the country.

Infuriated by the coup attempt and quick to blame its instigation on Erdogan's erstwhile ally, US based cleric Fetullah Gulen, Erdogan and his government imposed a country-wide state of emergency from 2016 until mid-2018. Since the coup attempt thousands of citizens have been detained without trial, over 90,000 civil servants have been fired, and the AKP narrowly won a referendum to dramatically enhance the powers of the executive.¹ Furthermore human rights in Turkey have been severely curtailed following the coup, including the detention of approximately 150 journalists, a number that outpaces China and Egypt.² The deterioration of democratic standards and widespread human rights abuses has undermined Turkish civil society under Erdogan's rule. Some of this democratic deterioration was sudden. Some of civil society,

¹ "Turkey 2017/2018" Amnesty International. Accessed December 2017. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/europe-and-central-asia/turkey/report-turkey/>.

² Kareem Shaheen and Gözde Hatunoğlu. "Turkish Activists Decry Attack on Press Freedom as Journalists Stand Trial." *Guardian*, July 24 2017. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/24/turkish-activists-decry-attack-press-freedom-journalists-stand-trial>.

however, such as unions³, has been in decline long before the fallout from the coup attempt. The story of unions in Turkey is a precursor of the country's democratic recession today.

Despite Turkey possessing attributes that should lead to a strong union presence, union membership and political power has significantly declined over the last 30 or so years. Turkey ought to have strong labor organizing in an economy dominated by labor-intensive industries, with the help of union friendly pressure from the European Union (EU), and because of unionization's once widespread influence. Despite these factors, the impotence of organized labor is due to the country's embrace of neoliberalist policies from the 1980s onward and weak democratic institutions.

Why Turkey ought to have strong unions

As the fifth largest exporter to the EU⁴ and 25th largest exporter in the world, Turkey's economy is export-driven.⁵ Its exports also come from labor intensive industries such as metal-working, agriculture, and textile production.⁶ Though Turkey's economy has become more service oriented recently, these industries have traditionally lent themselves to labor organizing for better wages, safety standards, and import protections.

Until recently political pressure from the EU was a meaningful force pushing reforms of Turkey's human rights, economic, and governance policies. As an official candidate country of the EU since 1999, Turkey is required to meet the Copenhagen Criteria, a set of political,

³ The term union, trade union, labor union, and organized labor will be used interchangeably.

⁴ "Client and Supplier Countries of the EU28 in Merchandise Trade (value %)". European Commission Directorate General of Trade. November 23, 2017.

http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_122530.pdf.

⁵ OEC - Turkey (TUR) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners. <https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/tur/>. Accessed 14 Dec. 2017.

⁶ Central Intelligence Agency World Fact Book (United States Central Intelligence Agency). Last updated August 23, 2018. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/geos/tu.html>.

economic, and legal criterion ensuring that a candidate country is on par with fellow EU member countries.⁷ Turkey is also a member of the International Labour Organization (ILO) which has criticized the restrictions on trade unions. The ILO's criticisms were reflected in EU progress reports from the era where Turkey was perhaps closest to becoming a member state, in particular raising concerns about a lack of action to correct the limits on freedom of association and collective bargaining.⁸ In the mid-2000s, a time of greater political will for Turkey to join the EU, this external pressure should have helped trade unions push for progress and protect them from anti-union legislation.

One might also expect Turkey to maintain strong unions because in recent history they were robust. In 1975 Turkey had 781 unions and in 1980 DISK, a leftist and overtly political union, had 500,000 members.⁹ Additionally, even as neoliberal policies were being pressed onto Turkey, Dogan asserts that unions were still powerful actors in the late 1980s: "... workers reacted, both against their decreasing purchasing power and living standards... This mounting social opposition, led by the workers employed in the public sector, resulted in the end of Motherland Party rule and paved the way for the coalition governments of the 1990s".¹⁰ Aware of the potential blowback, the AKP was careful to avoid too much legislation unfriendly to unions for fear of sparking unrest: "At first, the AKP followed tradition in this respect by never

⁷ Manfred Wannöffel. "Trade Unions in Turkey: Past, Present and Future Developments." *SEER: Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe* 14, no. 4 (2011): 564, accessed December 1, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43293441>.

⁸ Wannöffel, "Trade Unions in Turkey", 564.

⁹ Basak Kus and Isik Ozel. "United We Restrain, Divided We Rule: Neoliberal Reforms and Labor Unions in Turkey and Mexico." *European Journal of Turkish Studies. Social Sciences on Contemporary Turkey*, no. 11 (October 5, 2010): 9. <http://journals.openedition.org/ejts/4291>.

¹⁰ Gorkem M. Dogan. "The Deradicalisation of Organised Labour" ed. Akça, İsmet, et al. *Turkey Reframed: Constituting Neoliberal Hegemony*. (Pluto Press, 2013), 191. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aul/detail.action?docID=3386750>.

crossing certain, albeit ever-receding, red lines laid down by the labour unions”.¹¹ Despite these conditions, however, unions crumbled. Union ripe industries, EU pressure, and a once strong history could not protect organized labor from tumbling.

The evisceration of unions

Unions in Turkey have a rather short history. It was not until 1963 that the first union was allowed to fully operate. This followed several decades of repression on labor organizing and laws prohibiting strikes.¹² Unions gained power in the 1960s and 70s, but much of the momentum that they built was halted by a military coup in 1980. The following decade proved to be consequential for trade unions in Turkey. As neoliberalism became the fashionable economic approach globally, a tough anti-union law was adopted in 1983.¹³ The early 1990s presented a short period of reinvigorated union opposition to privatization, but in a post-Soviet climate, labor leadership was afraid of being seen as socialist and thus was unable to directly challenge: “...[the] discourse praising the self-regulating market, and viewing private enterprise as the most efficient social mechanism for distributing goods among the polity”.¹⁴ The neoliberal approaches set in place under then-prime minister Ozal were not abandoned after his term. By the time Turkey’s current AK party came to power in 2002, the ground was fertile for more aggressive neoliberal plans.

The noose has further tightened on unions under the AKP, ensuring a continuation of policies of the 1980s. As Celik describes, following the AKP ascent to power: “...there has been significant erosion in trade union rights. The results of this erosion are impressive both

¹¹ Dogan, “Deradicalisation of Organised Labour”, 189.

¹² Wannöffel, 548.

¹³ Wannöffel, 553.

¹⁴ Dogan, 192.

qualitatively (legislation, implementation, and socio-political effect) and quantitatively (union density and coverage of collective agreement)".¹⁵ From 2001 to 2011, the OECD reports that union density dropped by 46%, bringing it to its lowest levels in 50 years.¹⁶ Aside from the quantitative measures of erosion, Celik's observations speak to the first consequence of neoliberal reforms for in Turkey: the depoliticization of unions.

Numerous scholars have pointed out that Turkey's unions were once, albeit briefly, a political force to be reckoned with.¹⁷ Turkey began to shift from an economy driven by import substitution to one led by exports, which Celik asserts that: "...unions ceased to be viewed as a social force, or partners to be reconciled with".¹⁸ Furthermore under the AKP the focus has been on consolidating unions that are friendly to the party rather than eliminating unions altogether.¹⁹ This method has been particularly effective in public sector unions as many of the employees are politically sympathetic to the party. Additionally, the AKP take a clientelistic approach to unions, rewarding favorable union mobilization with positions in public office.²⁰

Another consequence to this evisceration of unions is increasing job insecurity. With the stripping of public protections and increased privatization, many observe that Turkey's workforce has bent towards flexibility of labor. In reference to a 2003 law curtailing individual union rights Celik recounts:

¹⁵ Aziz Çelik. "Turkey's New Labour Regime under the Justice and Development Party in the First Decade of the Twenty-First Century: Authoritarian Flexibilization." *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 51, no. 4 (July 2015): 627. doi: [10.1080/00263206.2014.987665](https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2014.987665).

¹⁶ Celik, "Turkey's New Labour Regime", 629.

¹⁷ Kus & Ozel, "Neoliberal Reforms and Labor", 9.

¹⁸ Celik qtd. in Efe Gürçan and Berk Mete. *Neoliberalism and the Changing Face of Unionism: The Combined and Uneven Development of Class Capacities in Turkey*. (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 94.

¹⁹ Celik, 633.

²⁰ Gurcan & Mete, "Changing Face of Unionism", 111.

“The [AKP] has used the act to restrict the provisions of job security that were established by the former coalition government. Job security now applies only to enterprises employing 30 or more workers, up from an earlier period when it applied to enterprises employing 10 workers. In this way, more than half of the all workers in Turkey have been excluded from job security”.²¹

A flexible labor market is inherent to a neoliberal economic regime and runs counter to the kinds of protections that unions seek to assert. The deeper Turkey’s governments have pushed toward broad privatization and subcontracted work, the less legitimacy unions have had. As Aydin summarizes: “The heightened possibilities of unemployment and competition for jobs in the formal sector tended to pacify the working class as a force for putting pressure on the state”.²² The depoliticization of unions and the consequent job insecurity that neoliberal policies produce reinforce each other.

Explaining union weakness

As alluded to above, the global rise of neoliberalist economics, the 1980 military coup, and anti-Soviet sentiment all coalesced to set Turkey on a path of feeble unions and social protections. In addition to the changes brought by neoliberalism weak and unstable institutions undermined Turkey’s unions.

Neoliberalism is a rather catch-all phrase and for clarity’s sake this paper uses the definition given by Steger and Roy:

²¹ Celik, 623-624.

²² Zülküf Aydin. *The Political Economy of Turkey*. (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 102.

“[A] neoliberal mode of governance adopts the self-regulating free market as the model for proper government...” and neoliberal policy is: “...expressed in what we like to call the ‘D-L-P Formula’: (1) deregulation (of the economy); (2) liberalization (of trade and industry); and (3) privatization (of state-owned enterprises)”.²³

Turkey pursued this approach to governance largely in response to several economic crises that befell it. In the 1990s The International Monetary Fund (IMF) stepped in with an austerity program that pushed privatization, increased flexibility in the labor market, and reduced national social spending.²⁴ Naturally, this environment meant fewer worker protections and lower wages to help Turkey be more competitive in the global economy. Underlying the adjustment schemes of the 1980s and 90s was: “...the allegation that Turkey could not successfully export goods because of the high level of wages. As a result, there was pressure to find methods to discipline wages”.²⁵ Though the 1990s was a challenging decade for Turkey economically, the 1980 coup d’etat was a key turning point in labor union power.

The coup was initiated in part because of divides over the January 24 (1980) decrees. Suffering from severe inflation and debt crises from the 1970s, the January decrees were an unpopular stabilization package.²⁶ Reactions to this package escalated to violence and the military stepped in to restore order.²⁷ Civilian rule returned in 1983, but the more labor friendly 1961 constitution had been rewritten. Celik describes the latter version: “The aim was to protect the state against society. The Constitution of 1982 put in place significant restrictions on social

²³ Manfred Steger and Ravi K. Roy. *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aul/detail.action?docID=480647>.

²⁴ Dogan, 188.

²⁵ Celik, 620.

²⁶ Kus & Ozel, 9.

²⁷ Kus & Ozel, 9-10.

and trade union rights, while protecting the social state on paper only”.²⁸ The labor unions in Turkey have never fully recovered from the coup. In addition to the damage it inflicted on unions specifically, it also continued to fracture already fragile institutions of democracy. Aydin summarizes: “Under the authoritarian conditions created by the 1980 military intervention, the working-class movement was severely undermined...The marginalisation of the trade unions has continued until now in order to allow the repressive wage policies of the neo-liberal economic project to be implemented”.²⁹ The coup and the instability it brought simultaneously ushered in drastic economic reforms and crushed unions just as they tried to regain their power.

Finally, the Cold War politics of the 1980s had a significant influence on unions’ ability to articulate their political concerns, which ultimately weakened their legitimacy. Since the 1940s Turkey’s relationship with the West has largely been based on seeking protection from Soviet power.³⁰ Due to international relations and the military’s intolerance of communism, during the Cold War and after, any labor organizing that had a whiff of socialism was minimally met with skepticism and more often with suppression. Reflecting on the Ozal administration’s prioritization of private enterprise and self-regulating markets Dogan notes that: “The labour union leadership failed to openly challenge this claim as they were afraid of being labelled as endorsing a pro-socialist world view, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Bloc”.³¹ This timing meant that just as Turkish labor unions needed to be most critical of the neoliberal regime that was to be their undoing, they were reticent.

²⁸ Celik, 620.

²⁹ Aydin, 101.

³⁰ Aydin, 98.

³¹ Dogan, 192.

Though the neoliberal shift in Turkey's economic and social policies certainly was a catalyst for unions to decline, the weakness of Turkey's democratic institutions also predetermined that sustaining organized labor's power would be challenging. As a starting point, fundamentals of Turkish identity and political culture have authoritarian roots. While the republic's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk built an impressive new nation out of the rubble of the Ottoman Empire, the rapid political and social reforms he imposed on the young country were abrupt and undemocratic. As Aydin points out regarding Atatürk's dismissal of religion and enforcement of nationalism: "No opposition to the principles of Kemalism, which included nationalism, secularism, étatism, revolutionism and populism, was tolerated".³² This authoritarian legacy continued until 1946, which was the first year of multi-party elections. Furthermore, when democratic initiatives were pushed forward in Turkey it was largely a strategic decision due to the conditionality of US support following World War II.³³ This behavior is consistent with the arguments that Levitsky and Murillo make about weak institutions. "In the developing world, window-dressing institutions are often a response to international demands or expectations. Dependence on international assistance creates incentives for state elites to borrow the form—though not necessarily the substance—of Western-style institutions".³⁴ Despite significant maturation since the 1940s, fragile institutions and the strength of the military have prevented lasting democracy from taking root.

Turkey has experienced four military coups, as well as one attempted coup, since 1967. Consequently Turkey's constitution has been rewritten numerous times. This is a clear example of Levitsky and Murillo's conception that instability is a fundamental trait of weak institutions:

³² Aydin, 96.

³³ Aydin, 98.

³⁴ Joseph and Van de Walle qtd in Steven Levitsky and María V. Murillo. "Variation in Institutional Strength." *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 12, no. 1, (2009), 120.

“In a context of persistent regime instability, for example, actors may opt not to invest in skills which are only useful under democratic institutions—and instead to develop skills [or] relationships (e.g., with religious authorities, the military, or foreign powers) that enhance their capacity to operate in multiple regime settings”.³⁵ This instability of regimes has facilitated both weak institutions and bolstered less democratic informal institutions.

The informal institutions of clientelism, paternalism, and identity politics determine class-based mobilization in Turkey today.³⁶ So-called “yellow” unions clearly demonstrate this as they are understood to be friendly with the ruling party, usually in a relationship marked by clientelism.³⁷ Under AKP two unions have been strategically coopted to discourage critical unions and pacify workers. The first of these is HAK-IS, established in 1976, which has always had a distinctly pious, Islamic membership base.³⁸ Due to its socio-political alignment with AKP, the party used HAK-IS to undermine other labor unions.³⁹ In addition to HAK-IS, a prominent example of yellow unionism is MEMUR-SEN, a once insignificant confederation of civil servants, MEMUR-SEN has become a partner for the government in the labor movement, skyrocketing its membership by 1586% since the AKP came to power.⁴⁰ As Celik reports of MEMUR-SEN’s recruitment: “Workers are forced to resign from their unions and become members of a confederation close to the government”.⁴¹ Indeed with unstable institutions, frequent regime change, and endemic corruption, workers have opted for clientelistic relations in favor of democratic channels that are likely fruitless for them.

³⁵ Levitsky & Murillo, 123.

³⁶ Gurcan & Mete, 109.

³⁷ Gurcan & Mete, 98.

³⁸ Wannoffel, 554.

³⁹ Gurcan & Mete, 112.

⁴⁰ Celik, 632.

⁴¹ Celik, 632.

Conclusion

What are the consequences of declining unions in Turkey? Aside from the obvious outcome that workers have fewer protections and less bargaining power, the ripple effects on the economy and political activism are significant. One recent example is a 2014 mine fire in Soma, Turkey which killed 301 workers. Prior demands to investigate similar fires were ignored by the AKP in parliament and victims' families are skeptical that they will see justice.⁴² Were union power stronger perhaps these conditions would have been investigated before or there would be a sense of accountability for the mine bosses.

For the brief decades when unions were robust and combative, they were political actors who had influence. Rather than issues of wages, worker safety, and collective bargaining, the potential for class based organizing is what truly threatened ruling elites of the last 30 or so years. Potential for powerful political organizing that challenges a regime may be unpopular with governments in most countries, but the story of union decay is also the story of democracy's decay in Turkey. In fact the fate of unions was perhaps a precursor to the more recent repressive conditions in Turkey. Although a fully democratic state never existed in Turkey, the late 1990s and 2000s brought the country the closest. Like unions, democracy has become the casualty of aggressive neoliberal policies that prioritize free-markets over civil society, amplify the voice of business over the rule of law, and allow corruption to thrive. Due in part to democracy's short lifespan in Turkey as Levitsky and Murillo argue, the passage of time really does matter for

⁴² Joris Leverink, "Turkey's Unions Are Dead, Long Live the Cooperative?" Roar magazine. April 28, 2015, <https://roarmag.org/essays/turkey-worker-rights-union-cooperative/>.

institutional sustainability.⁴³ The 2016 coup attempt tested the country's stability, further threatening Turkey's fragile unions and tenuous democratic structures for some time to come.

⁴³ Steven Levitsky and María V. Murillo. "Variation in Institutional Strength." *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 12, no. 1, (2009): 123.