

## SOVEREIGNTY AND DEMOCRACY IN TURKEY AND ITS POSTMODERN SUPPLEMENT OF NORTH CYPRUS

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Turkey: The Question of Sovereignty

Turkey is officially, constitutionally a secular republic, despite the fact that the country is 99% Muslim. Of course this last figure must be qualified because many Turks are secular Muslims, for whom religious law and observances are minor or irrelevant parts of their lives. In any case, the possibility of secular government with democratic institutions has significant implications for the mideast, where religious factions and parties typically dominate so much of political life. The strong insistence on the secular status of politics can also help to remind us in the United States of what a strict separation of religion and state looks like. As of today (August 23, 2005) the question of whether Iraq will adopt a constitution guaranteeing a privileged status to Islamic law (sharia) is still open. The ban of headscarves at universities and government buildings makes a strong statement. The complex history that led to this situation – the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the attempted division of Turkish territory by the European powers after 1918, and the rise of Ataturk, to name some of the main events – explains to a large extent the formation and endurance of the Turkish republic. Observers sometimes talk about the “deep state” in Turkey, the infrastructure which supports secular parliamentary democracy. In other words, the “deep state” is that combination of forces that works to insure Turkey remaining secular and democratic (I leave for another occasion the question of just how democratic Turkey is, how to compare its practices – elections, use and abuse of media etc. – with those of other “democracies.” I’ll just note here that there seems to be no general agreement as to what a “true” democracy looks like and to what extent any set of democratic institutions is to be regarded as normative, and whether institutions will necessarily reflect different histories and cultures.)

What I will focus on is the question of sovereignty, a classical issue in political philosophy. The sovereign (whether an individual or group) is typically defined as the agent possessing a monopoly of legitimate power within a polity. By this definition, the elected officials of Turkey would seem to exercise sovereign power in the name of the Turkish people (I will also be asking whether the concept of the “Turkish people” as employed in Turkey is a racial or ethnic – some would say racist – category). However, in Turkey’s complex history (since the 1920’s) there have been three military coups (1960, 1971, 1980); in each case a period of army rule was followed, eventually, by a “return” to civilian government. But was this *in fact* a return? In each case a prolonged period of military rule lasted until the army felt that the nation was ready for parliamentary elections, and this readiness was marked by the junta’s disqualification or exclusion of leading political figures and parties active before the coup. Let us consider the question of sovereignty more carefully. Another conception of sovereignty is that the sovereign is the power that declares what jurists and political philosophers call a “state of exception.” In Anglo-American discourse such a condition is often referred to by terms such as “martial law” or “emergency powers”; however, these terms are not as clearly general as “state of exception” and often lead to the incorrect view that the suspension of

normal law is always tied to war, whether international or civil. A state of exception is understood to be a state of emergency, a time in which the usual laws and perhaps the constitution are suspended. Instances in the United States would include Lincoln's suspension of the right of habeas corpus during the Civil War and, some would argue, the decision of the Supreme Court that effectively gave the 2000 election to George W. Bush. In Germany, Hitler took power by declaring a state of exception, suspending but not revoking the Weimar constitution. On this view of sovereignty, the way to find out who the true sovereign is lies in identifying which agent in a society is able to declare and enforce a state of exception (for an incisive discussion of the general issue, with illustrations from Roman law to the present, see Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* [University of Chicago, 2004]). On this analysis, the Turkish army would be the sovereign power in Turkey. The army has declared several states of exception, and it explains these as required by its duty to preserve a secular, democratic republic. The army understands its occasional assumption of power as a protective measure. The practices of democracy – parliamentary elections, for example – must be temporarily suspended in order to insure that anti-democratic forces (e.g. religious parties) do not take power and consequently modify or eliminate the very “democratic” practices that brought them to power. To the extent that the army not only justifies earlier coups in this way but also holds in reserve the option of intervening again, should conditions warrant, it seems reasonable to say that the army is the sovereign power in Turkey, for it is the agent that can declare and enforce a state of exception.

Accordingly, Turkish political life can be said to take place under the shadow of the army; all political actors and parties must reckon with the perpetual possibility of another army seizure of power. If sovereignty is the power to declare a state of exception, then the army is the sovereign power in Turkey. The Turkish army constitutes itself as the guardian of democracy; the people can be trusted only up to a point, and then, so the thinking goes, matters must be taken in hand by cooler and wiser military heads. As Feroz Ahmad describes the situation after the 1960 coup “the armed forces were given autonomy and were recognized by the civilians as partners and guardians of the new order they had just created” (Ahmad 123). “Partners and guardians”: the “and” nicely elides the question of sovereignty. “Partners” suggests equal participation in a common enterprise; no doubt, so far as things function smoothly, this could describe a working relationship. But only the military are said to be “guardians,” and so they have a pre-eminent role which becomes obvious whenever they exercise their guardianship – as they have done in the three coups of 1960-80. The guardians do not sleep between their periods of explicit rule and it is clear that the constant possibility of another military intervention is a factor taken into account by all political actors. Any politician who knows that they and their party may be banned from political life by the army must tread more cautiously than they would in another setting. This situation could remind us of the guardians in Plato's *Republic*, where a superior wisdom is understood to be the absolute criterion of political judgment. However, Plato's guardians are forbidden to own property. In the absence of such a prohibition, and given the power of the army, it is not altogether surprising that the Turkish army has become a “third sector” of the economy, along with the state and private sectors (Ahmad, 123).

In various ways I and other members of our group explored the question of sovereignty and democracy with Turkish military spokesmen, political scientists, and

authorities in international relations. When asked if the army was not the true, residual sovereign power in the Turkish system, the answer was that Turkey was now established firmly enough as a parliamentary democracy that army intervention as before was unthinkable. At the same time, an army spokesman reiterated that it was the army's fundamental duty to safeguard Turkish democracy and maintain a secular state. The denial of the army's sovereignty seems evasive. To say that army intervention now seems unthinkable does not speak to the question of whether it might become thinkable once more. After all, the claim by those who declare an emergency or state of exception is usually that such an interruption of "normal" political life is necessitated by events that could not have been anticipated. If political life – and its responses to such "external" events such as terrorism, natural disaster, or war – is unpredictable, as history and common sense combine to teach, then it is not to the point to say that a state of exception is now unimaginable. Given that the main outlines of twentieth century political history – not only in Turkey – can be construed in terms of these declarations of states of exception (as Agamben forcefully argues), the appeal to what seems currently unimaginable (by Turkish public opinion?) is evasive. Of course the evasion may be unconscious in most cases.

The place of the army in the Turkish polity and its commitment to secularism raise a number of questions which have implications far beyond Turkey. In a heavily militarized world the possibility of either direct or residual rule by the armed forces is widespread. Direct entrance of the military into the economic sphere (as in China, Thailand, and elsewhere) enhances army power. *Quis custodiet custodiet?* Who will guard the guardians? And, when a secular regime has a strong and sovereign military component, is there an inevitable tendency for it to seek ideological support in secular versions of racism and chauvinism?

It is worth noting, as does Ahmad, that the 1960 coup "was the first and last successful military intervention made from outside the hierarchical structure of Turkey's armed forces" (Ahmad 122). When the army constitutes itself as a guardian, why should lower officers respect higher ones, if they believe that their superiors are complicit in a betrayal of democracy, secularism, or whatever the defining traits of the polity are taken to be? In an institution which prides itself on its success in "saving" the parliamentary state from itself, how can one guarantee the obedience of restless or discontented officers? Institutionally, this question was dealt with by the formation of the Armed Forces Union in 1961, by which the military monitors itself. Only time can tell whether this self-discipline will be universally effective. The general point is that the military (like the Platonic guardians!) must create mechanisms to enforce ideological unity. The high command must guard not only against impetuous rebels who go too far and too quickly in intervening in politics from the side of the army; they must also be on their guard against the growth, within the military, of competing ideologies. These would include both extreme positions of the left and the right, as well as religious ideologies at odds with the very idea of the secular state. Recently there has been publicity about religious proselytizing at US service academies, notably that of the Air Force, that has been overlooked or condoned by the authorities. My guess is that such things are unlikely to happen, now, in Turkey; but who is to say that they are impossible?. While the representatives of the army and some of the academics that we talked to tended to dismiss such questions as pertaining at most to the past, I wonder if they may be congratulating

themselves prematurely that Turkey has attained the degree of stability that renders the questions irrelevant.

Finally, there is the question of Turkish nationalism and its possible complicity with racism. Much was said in the course of our trip about the tolerance practiced by the Ottoman Empire, often with the implication that this heritage could be revived as a “postmodern” way of dealing with questions of religious and cultural diversity. Of course, Ottoman tolerance was possible only because Islam had political and ideological hegemony in the society. What happens in the absence of such hegemony? The democratic process itself is a problematic candidate in Turkey as the chief ideological value, since military sovereignty has a very ambivalent relation to that process. Since Ataturk, the Turkish state has regarded itself also as a nation, that is, as a political unity founded on common facts of birth and descent. Who are the Turkish people, who belongs, what is it to be a minority in Turkey – all of these questions arise as soon as the concept of people is invoked. Surely the history of racism and genocide in the last century should make us wary of the appeal to the unity of a “people.” As several of our interlocutors pointed out, Turkey is a country which includes many people of mixed origin, and is perhaps more diverse than many other states. The Armenian and Kurdish “questions” need only be asked to remind us of the dangers inherent in any ethnic or racial definition of the “people.” If so what are we to make of General Cengiz Arslan’s comment that “the genetic compass of the Turkish people points west”? In context, this was perhaps a relatively benign statement about the desire of the Turks to join the European Union. But it also points back to the historical movement by which a migrating group conquered and occupied the current territory centuries ago. And it has a disturbing similarity to the racist ideologies that led to World War II and which continue to justify “ethnic cleansing” in the former Yugoslavia, Darfur, and elsewhere.

#### North Cyprus: Turkey’s Postmodern .Supplement

After our group had spoken with the chief Turkish army strategist at the Ankara equivalent of the Pentagon, we paid a visit to the Ataturk memorial and shrine, which monumentalizes the foundation of the republic. In Turkish life, a visit to the memorial is fraught with significance. I was slightly surprised to see some covered women approaching the shrine. Later I learned that some Turkish politicians once identified as Islamist had softened their public image by paying well publicized visits. Both the memorial and the talk with the general promoted the idea of Turkey as an independent secular republic. If there was a shadow of racism and chauvinism in the general’s declaration about the genetically inspired westward movement of the Turkish people, there was also another theme: Turkey is properly European, and ought to be admitted to the EU. So rapid industrialization, participation in the global market, and parliamentary democracy (with military rule no longer an option, so it is claimed) are arguments for EU entrance. Yet there remain a number of questions. How firm is Turkey’s civilian democracy? What is the status of minorities, notably (but not exclusively) the Kurds? With respect to the latter, can Turkey even recognize that there are outstanding human rights issues still needing to be resolved? And then there is the Cyprus question. I had done very little preparation for the Cyprus leg of our trip, but knew that the island was politically divided between two ethnic groups, Greek south and the Turkish north. A

rapid review of Cypriot history reminded me that until 1960, the island had been owned by Crusaders, the Venetians, and the Ottoman Empire (among others!), that the British had leased it from the Ottomans in the 1880's and had acquired it as a colony by default after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. In 1960, internal pressure which was at first directed to union with Greece, was channeled into a successful independence movement. Yet in the 1970's the US-supported military junta in Greece fomented a coup on the island which was meant to lead to unification with Greece. The Turkish military responded with an invasion, claiming both to protect ethnic Turks on the island and to protect its independent status, of which they were a co-guarantor, along with Greece and Britain. When the dust of combat had cleared, the island was divided in two. Now a United Nations line separates north and south; the UN's Annan plan for reunification was rejected by the south, yet approved by the north, in 2004. Cyprus then presents an exemplary case of disputed boundaries and sovereignty, a laboratory for rethinking questions of nationality, ethnicity, and possible multi-cultural alternatives to separatism.

We flew from Ankara to North Cyprus – to an airport, as we later discovered, which was not internationally recognized as legitimate in the international aviation system. Those who were not already aware of this learned that the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus was itself not recognized as a legitimate government by any country other than Turkey. Flying on North Cyprus Air, I glanced through the airline magazine and found a brief mention of an art exhibition in Nicosia that apparently ignored and perhaps even questioned the division of the island. Although our time on Cyprus (two nights and a day and a half) was very limited, we decided that if at all possible we would try to visit the exhibition, which was said to be distributed around Nicosia, both north and south of the UN zone. Given my interests in both political philosophy and aesthetics, I was excited by the prospect of seeing an unconventional and dispersed exhibition that explored and challenged the boundaries between art and political power. Our Turkish guide strongly discouraged us from entering the UN zone, and even more strongly from passing into the southern section of the island. He warned us that there would be at best enormous bureaucratic complications if we attempted to do either, and that we might possibly be detained or questioned. No doubt part of his apprehension was due to his not being fully informed about the situation on the ground; he may also have been worried that his own work as tour operator could be endangered by his running afoul of the northern authorities. In any case, we took advantage of a two hour morning window in our schedule to take our tour bus to Nicosia, in search of the art exhibition. At that point we had only the scantiest information about how to locate it, but we suspected (rightly) that much of it clustered around the UN zone. We arrived at the UN line without having detected any signs of the exhibition, but once there we decided to ignore our guide and attempt to enter the UN zone. As it turned out, this was a very routine procedure. When we had entered North Cyprus on the preceding day, rather than having our passports stamped we received a separate document certifying our entrance into the country (or is it a country?), since we'd been told that having a North Cyprus stamp on our passports would debar us from entering Greece or the Greek Cypriot republic, which call North Cyprus "Turkish occupied north Cyprus." So we pulled out those little slips of paper and proceeded into the strange space marking the edge between north and south and splitting the ancient walled city of Nicosia into two.

How ironic it was that a city built on the principle of being a walled and unified capital, the fortified center of the island, should itself be radically split in this way. On entering the no man's land we immediately became aware of the vastly different aesthetic and political messages emanating from the two sides, a difference that was not part of the art exhibition in the narrow sense, but which provided its essential context. On the Turkish border, as we had seen from the bus, houses were well maintained and often beautifully landscaped. The Greek border, in contrast, had been deliberately kept in a state of ruin and decay, meant to reflect the ravages of the civil war. Large signs and posters on the Greek side – mostly in English, the signs themselves in a state of decay in keeping with the buildings – accused the Turks of inhuman massacres, related the stories of innocent victims of Turkish aggression, and called Turkey (which they regard as the occupying power) of being an apartheid regime. So the two sides were already engaged in a political-aesthetic confrontation. But where was the art exhibition? Certainly not in the UN zone, where we were constantly reminded by prominent signs that photography was prohibited (I now have a set of photographs of signs forbidding photography). Wandering through the UN zone, we eventually came to a point of passage into the south, had our papers stamped once more, and strolled for about fifteen minutes, visiting a Greek orthodox church that announced services in Polish (possibly for UN soldiers) and got a brief glimpse of busy city life. On the way back, we encountered a solitary hunger striker, a 50-ish Belgian man, who explained that he had been traveling in contested areas like this one to make the case for peace. We found the office of an NGO that promotes the preservation and restoration of Nicosia's architectural heritage, at least implicitly making the case for reunion or for some as yet undetermined path beyond the current fracture of Cyprus. For indeed, what is at issue is the question of sovereignty. Let me make the case for avoiding the tangled historical argument about blame for the partition of the island, and for questioning either side's arguments, based on that history, to claim a legitimate political authority. The current situation came about as the response of one military junta confronting another, which was not only attempting to supplant civilian government, but also planning to transfer sovereignty to Greece. If the Greek Cypriots could claim that Turkey was violating their sovereignty, then Cypriot Turks could claim that the junta was first usurping the civilian government and planning to surrender sovereignty to Greece. Turkey, as co-guarantor (with Britain and Greece) of the 1960 constitution, could claim to be acting on its behalf, in other words as attempting to preserve or restore the legitimate government of the island.. Failing that, Turkey could claim to be preserving the lives, safety, and rights of Cypriots who had legitimate expectations based on the 1960 constitution. One could of course raise further questions (as in the first part of this report) about the Turkish state of exception. But clearly, rule by military junta, whether by Greek Cypriot officers in Nicosia or by generals in Ankara, constitutes a state of exception.

What does the situation of Cyprus then tell us about the question of Turkish sovereignty? For the south, the answer is simple: North Cyprus is simply "Turkish occupied North Cyprus." The large signs placed by the south at the border wish travelers to the north to enjoy their stay in a territory that practices apartheid. Now I've just suggested that it is very difficult to argue that either party in the present division of the island can claim legitimate rule, either of the entirety of Cyprus (as does the south) or a portion of it (as does the north). No doubt terrible deeds were done by both Greeks and

Turks. Moreover, it may even be true that the south is attached to its identity as a victim, as we heard in a talk at the university on the afternoon of our one full day in Turkey. The professor, a Finn who had lived in North Cyprus for some time, attempted to analyze the depth of south Cypriot hatred for the north in terms of Nietzschean and Freudian notions of trauma, victimization, and *ressentiment*. Traumatized by the earlier conflicts, so the argument goes, the south has invested itself in the dynamics of victimhood, which involves demonizing the other and, in contrast, designating oneself as good. This is what Nietzsche calls the morality of “good and evil” or slave morality, as opposed to the self-affirming position he calls master morality or the morality of “good and bad” (see *On the Genealogy of Morality*, First Treatise). When I asked the speaker whether his analysis might be turned around, so that North Cyprus could be seen as exhibiting the arrogance of power that we associate with the victors or masters, his response seemed unclear.

Nevertheless, whatever complex mix of history, emotions, and politics lies behind the decaying signs and posters, with their charges of murders of civilians and other atrocities, can North Cyprus be absolved of the charge of racism or apartheid? (Of course the south might also be charged with similar violations of human rights). This might seem to be a strange charge, given what we saw of North Cyprus on our admittedly brief survey. For starters, it seems that residents of the south can easily enter and leave the north, at least for limited stays (the same is not the case in the south where Turks and North Cypriots – the south seems not to distinguish the two – are not allowed to enter). North Cyprus seems to welcome foreigners, promoting European tourism and vacation or retirement homes for those attracted to the Mediterranean climate and lifestyle. If it was an aesthetic shock to see rows of more or less identical new houses, occupied by and marketed to a largely British set of buyers, it was also evidence of a bustling economy that was positioning itself well in the global marketplace. In another respect, North Cyprus seemed to have at least one freedom that Turkey lacks. As we saw at the universities, women are not barred from covering. The headscarf issue, which was one of the great subjects of discussion in our preparation for the seminar, was a non-issue in North Cyprus. Looked at with the eye of the tourist (very tempting while enjoying a beer at the beautiful and classic Mediterranean harbor of Girne /Kyrenia) North Cyprus could seem like a postmodern paradise, a place that could accommodate pious Islamic women, male students looking for a less regulated and perhaps less dangerous place than the countries whose passports they hold, and Brits of a certain age looking for a place in the sun at cheaper prices than Provence or Tuscany. Even citizens of the south, we were told, would drive to the north for a day of sightseeing and dinner at one of the superb fish restaurants.

North Cyprus is then, the *supplement* of Turkey, in a sense elaborated by the French philosopher of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida. It is both external to that which it supplements and yet in some sense necessary to it. It is external in so far as the fiction is maintained that it is an independent state. At the same time it is necessary in so far as Turkey, given its nationalism with ethnocentric tendencies, must defend ethnic Turks wherever they may be and must display its explicit commitment to “European” forms of political freedom by tolerating and cooperating with regimes that allow expressions of religious commitment even in the public realm. It is both inside and outside Turkey (as Guantanamo is both inside and outside the United States).

So we are still left with the question of sovereignty. If North Cyprus is sovereign, as it claims, what exactly are Turkish troops doing there? Despite the one obvious difference in law that we observed (concerning covering in public institutions), can North Cyprus really be said to be independent of Turkey? Even the voters have little desire to hold on to their claimed sovereignty, since they voted in 2004 for the Annan plan that would reunify the island. To the extent, then, that the north is correctly described as “Turkish occupied North Cyprus,” it seems to share the ideology of Turkish nationalism. I’ve suggested earlier that a secular republic in which, despite the presence of certain democratic and parliamentary institutions, residual power rests with the army, is intrinsically open to non-democratic ideological justifications. Ataturk’s famous declaration “happy is he who is a Turk!” has in practice led to implicit and explicit ethnic and racial chauvinism and what is euphemistically called the problem of minorities. It is, of course, inaccurate to call this apartheid, for Turkey does not legislate separation of races or ethnic groups or confine certain peoples to restricted “homelands.” If North Cyprus is indeed Turkish occupied North Cyprus, it shares in the dilemma of Turkey: a secular republic with a nationalism that must, like the European nation states of the nineteenth century, appeal to origin or birth, the natal in the nation. And if we accept for a moment the fiction that North Cyprus is an independent republic, then it is indeed based on the removal and expropriation of its former Greek residents (as the government of the south is based on parallel operations applied to its former Turkish residents).

As we continued our morning exploration in and around the UN zone, and when we returned to Nicosia later that day, we finally encountered some signs of the art exhibition. Ironic dada-esque signs reading “Cyprus uber alles” were pasted in various places; these suggested a bitter mockery of all the suspicions, common on both sides, of a united Cyprus. We saw a small set of witty political drawings; we got a glimpse of an exhibition of pictures showing men and women whose figures were seen through bar codes, suggesting a political dehumanization. We talked to a very informative man in a store front who was a sponsor of the exhibition. We acquired a map showing the locations of some exhibits and listing some of the mobile ones and various scheduled events on both sides of the island (remembering that a principle of the exhibition was to ignore the boundary between north and south as much as possible). Eventually we learned more about what we had first heard as a rumor: that parts of the exhibition had been taken down by authorities. An artist had draped a newish and stylish apartment building with rags and laundry to suggest some of the conflicts of high and low, in and out, of Cypriot life. Although the owner (her father!) had given permission for the exhibit, the mayor of the northern half of Nicosia/Lefkosa had formally declared the work to be garbage, and so it was destroyed. Art was challenging the prevailing notions of sovereignty, and all the sovereigns, great and small, were terrified of the threat. I thought of the title of the event “leaps-of-faith.” As a philosopher, I immediately thought of Kierkegaard, who saw religion as requiring a leap beyond all of that which is known and assured. Transfer that idea to the political. In a world of sovereignties and nationalisms, a leap of faith beyond the limits of state and nation – or as the event’s co-curator Erden Kossova writes -- is a task not only for art in the narrow sense, but for the art of politics, the political imagination.