Society and State in Turkey Between Two Disasters

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Turkey has undergone a regime change, municipalities have transformed, and civil society has emerged as a dynamic actor. The results of all these transformations were crystallised in the February earthquakes.

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Moments of crisis expose both the weaknesses and capabilities of people and organisations. Their handling of unexpected situations reveals their skills and capacities. In this context, looking at the catastrophic earthquakes that shook Turkey in early February from such a vantage point can prove to be highly instructive. Perhaps, we may even take a step back and evaluate this latest painful tragedy in comparison with the Izmit earthquake of 1999.

Such an undertaking is particularly called for considering the major changes in Turkey's political and administrative life in the quarter century between 1999 and 2023. In the meantime, Turkey has undergone a regime change, municipalities have transformed, and civil society has emerged as a dynamic actor. The results of all these transformations were crystallised in the February earthquakes. In this brief, I will try to present a snapshot of Turkish politics between 1999 and 2023 by trying to summarise the activities and impact of actors at different levels during the earthquakes: the presidential system, the municipalities whose capacities have greatly increased since 1999, civil society organisations, who have become seriously institutionalised in the meantime, and grassroots communities.

The Presidential System:
Fast but heavy-handed

With a constitutional amendment in 2017, the Republic of Turkey transitioned to a presidential system of government. Unlike most semi-presidential and presidential systems around the world, Turkey's novel presidential system brought a serious limitation to the checks and balances through the legislative and judicial branches and entrusted an extraordinary power to the executive branch, which is gathered in the office of the president. It was thought that such a monolithic power would prevent the administrative problems and delays caused by the parliamentary system and enable the government to deliver quicker and more effective responses to problems of all kinds.

Since the introduction of the new regime there have been continuing debates as to whether or not this fast and effective system of government is or can be a cure for Turkey's problems. It thus remains a matter of debate just how quick, effective, and appropriate the extraordinary pandemic-related policies and current socio-economic decisions really were/are. With all powers concentrated in a single authority and person, the margin of action of institutions has never been more narrow. Today, all policies are attuned to the preferences, inclinations and decisions of the centre, the president. Originally expected to accelerate bureaucratic processes, the new system has become dependent on a single-person authority, which causes a backlog and delay of decisions.

The global pandemic that broke out in late 2019 turned into the first test for this centralised decision algorithm. The COVID-19 pandemic created extraordinary conditions in all areas of societies, economies, and cultures worldwide, making every decision most literally speaking a vital one. The fact that one single person was in charge indeed led to very fast decisions in Turkey, but this did not always mean that these decisions were correct and effective. The negative repercussions of decisions that were rapidly taken only to be recalled and altered an instant later were just as severe.

The earthquakes that hit Turkey in February 2023 had the country face extraordinary conditions of an unprecedented scale. The two major earthquakes and their aftershocks affected 11 provinces at the same time and required the mobilisation of all public resources. In order not to repeat the abysmal performance of 1999, when the government was accused of failing even

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to communicate with the disaster zone, a new administrative organisation had been set up to deal with disaster situations. The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency, which was established under the Prime Ministry in 2009, was affiliated to the Ministry of Interior in 2018. However, within the new regime, this organisation fell short of the expectations.

The Turkish Disaster Response Plan, the first of which was published on 20 December 2013 and the last on 4 February 2022, did not even work during the minor earthquake in Düzce on 23 November 2022, about two months before the major earthquakes. While the Plan envisaged all relevant institutions to act spontaneously in a level-4 disaster like the February earthquakes which requires the mobilisation of all national resources, the centralist hierarchy in the bureaucracy caused actors to think that they were not competent and authorized to act. Institutions refrained from taking initiative unless they received explicit instructions or orders to do so.

Even the President himself admitted that the state had failed to take the necessary action in the first few days in Adıyaman and asked the citizens for forgiveness. When it became clear that the new system did not help to speed up and improve bureaucratic processes and failed to rise to the challenge, the government declared a state of emergency in the earthquake zone and took additional measures.

Beyond all macro socio-economic variables, the presidential system of government, which promised a much faster and more effective administrative regime by getting rid of coalition negotiations, parliamentary negotiations, and other "brakes" of the parliamentary system, failed to deliver even in emergencies. The performance of public institutions in the February earthquakes indicates that, contrary to what was promised, the system has become heavy-handed and ineffective due to the excessive concentration of central powers in the president.

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Municipalities

Since 1999 Turkey has also witnessed a major transformation in terms of local governments. Having ascended to national power through the municipalities, the Justice and Development Party, took steps to empower local governments vis-à-vis the central government in the first years of its rule. In fact, the bill for the Basic Law on Public Administration, which was vetoed by the President of the Republic, proposed giving local governments general competence and transferring all powers, responsibilities, and resources to them, except for matters concerning the country as a whole. Although this fundamental change did eventually not materialise, the powers and resources of local governments were enhanced through a series of amendments to the laws on special provincial administrations, municipalities, and metropolitan municipalities between 2004-2005. The strengthening of the executive branch vested mayors with a key role in local governments.

In late 2012, another reform was carried out to extend the metropolitan boundaries to the provincial borders and abolish the special provincial administrations, which considerably widened the service areas and powers of metropolitan municipalities.

Thus, the metropolitan municipalities, 30 in total, began to govern a large part of Turkey's population and surface area on their own.

Until the 2019 local elections, the impact of the strengthened local government system remained less evident because the Justice and Development Party, which was in power in the central government, was also in power in many metropolitan cities and the municipal administrations remained largely subordinated to the centre within the party hierarchy. Meanwhile, in metropolitan municipalities where the Kurdish political movement was strong, mayors were dismissed and replaced by civil servants who were appointed as trustees to ensure that these municipalities remained under the control of the central government.

Following the 2019 local elections, which brought various metropolitan municipalities, especially Ankara and Istanbul, under the control of the opposition, the contradictions and conflicts between the centre and local governments began to surface. In an attempt to narrow metropolitan municipalities' room for manoeuvre, the government forced a rerun of the Istanbul elections, had certain powers transferred from metropolitan municipalities to the central

government and district municipalities, and exerted increased political pressures on local governments. In Southeastern Anatolia, the central government immediately returned to its practice of replacing mayors by centrally appointed trustees and tightened political pressure.

Less than a year after the local elections, the COVID-19 pandemic created new duties and responsibilities that far exceeded ordinary urban services. Between the necessary hygiene measures and inspections and aid and support mechanisms targeted to alleviate the impact of the economic slowdown on the one and decreasing financial resources on the other hand, municipalities tried to create miracles. At the same time, the central government continued and even increased its pressure by blocking aid and bank accounts and diverting financial, in-kind, and human resources to its own operations.

Trying to cope with the centre's interferences, municipalities devised innovative practices that enabled and facilitated solidarity among the public. The old tradition of anonymous solidarity between individuals where people pay forward for bread at bakeries so that others can pick up the already paid for "breads on the hanger" (called askıda ekmek in Turkish) became widespread through the mediation of municipalities. Similar practices were established to organise iftar meals (the evening meal during Ramadan) in Ankara, take over water, natural gas, and tax payments and distribute mother-baby packages in Istanbul, and share housing and provide household appliances after the earthquake in Izmir. These practices allowed municipalities to play an intermediary role in encouraging and facilitating mutual help and solidarity among local communities.

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in the major crisis created by the pandemic, and even strengthened their ties and cooperation with local communities whose trust they were able to win through their performance. Consequently, in the earthquakes in Kahramanmaraş in 2023, local governments wasted no time to go to work and provide relief. During the critical period immediately after the earthquakes, when the units of the central government were waiting for instructions and approval, the local administrations quickly sent their teams to the disaster area. In these first hours, communication was very difficult, making it nearly impossible to know where and what was needed. Nevertheless, municipalities immediately dispatched support services to the towns with which they had political, institutional, or personal ties. Search and rescue and fire brigade units, which were much improved compared to 1999, were the first teams on the road. Mobile soup kitchens, toilets and health units of municipalities also arrived in the region in the following days. Within a short period of time, metropolitan municipalities set up local sites to provide all kinds of municipal services in the earthquake zone.

Municipalities were also quick to establish humanitarian aid bridges, calling on citizens all over Turkey for their support and setting up aid collection centres. Both in these collection centres, where incoming aid was collected, sorted, and packaged, as well as in the distribution points and channels in the earthquake zone, it was volunteer citizens, perhaps more so than municipality employees, who jumped in to contribute to the relief efforts. Likewise, a significant part of the equipment and vehicles needed by the municipalities in the earthquake zone were provided with the support of citizens and institutions.

Thanks to the resources and experience they had gained since 1999, but most importantly, thanks to the relationship of trust they were able to build with citizens in the meantime, it was thus local governments who delivered the fastest and most effective response to the 2023 earthquakes.

Civil Society Organisations

Another actor group that has come to the fore in Turkey's socio-political life since the 1999 earthquakes has been civil society organisations. After the concept

of civil society had become a staple of the political terminology as a result of the HABITAT-II Summit in Istanbul in 1996, it was the good performance of the Search and Rescue Association AKUT during the Kocaeli Earthquakes that put flesh on the bones of this notion. Founded by a group of university student amateur mountain climbers, the Association became the emblematic organisation for the relief work after the earthquake on 17 August 1999. As all public and civil institutions were helpless and inactive in the face of the disaster, AKUT saved the lives of over 200 earthquake victims with its 150 volunteers, most of whom were young people. It rose to the top of the list of the most trusted organisations and grew rapidly thanks to the support and assistance it received. Political and administrative pressures on the organisation led to the departure of founding president Nasuh Mahruki from the management and his expulsion from membership in May 2022.

A few months after the 1999 earthquake, the number of AKUT-like organisations increased dramatically. Many similar communities and organisations emerged not only in the field of search and rescue but also in the fields of humanitarian aid, rehabilitation, children, women, and shelter, and civil society grew into an active,

functional and popular area of activity. All of a sudden, civil society was seen as an alternative to the "contaminated" political sphere and began to describe an area that allowed for the provision of certain services. In contrast to the incompetence, inadequacy, and inertia of public institutions, civil society organisations were seen as dynamic, honest, and effective actors that could play a key role in solving social problems. At a time when trust in state institutions had taken a blow, national and international organisations preferred to support and finance civil organisations in order to heal the wounds of the earthquake. Suddenly, civil organisations gained access to considerable resources.

After negotiations for Turkey's membership to the European Union were taken up in the 2000s, EU-supported projects burgeoned. This led to the emergence of professional teams that carried out the application procedures of these projects as well as the administrative procedures that needed to be followed once a project was approved. However, realising such high-budget projects also required a serious institutional capacity. Although the financing of the large quantity of qualified personnel, technical equipment, physical infrastructure, field staff and vehicles was easily secured during the project, organisations lacked the

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resources to maintain this capacity when projects terminated after a couple of years. Maintaining the organisational structure therefore depended on the ability to develop and implement further similar projects. With each project, organisations grew and became more and more professionalized, meanwhile also developing an increasingly complex bureaucratic structure. Civil society thus evolved into a field dominated by bureaucratic organisations with a professional staff who are specialised in certain areas, rather than a space organised from the grassroots and sustained by voluntary participation and work.

Moreover, since the central government continuously increased its control and pressure on associations and foundations, especially those receiving (financial) support from foreign organisations, these organisations saw themselves compelled to comply even more strictly with bureaucratic procedures.

In the immediate aftermath of the earthquakes, organisations that had been founded specifically to provide humanitarian assistance to Syrian refugees in the region quickly redirected their resources to help the earthquake victims, but as time passed, their institutional character prevented

them from responding quickly to the needs in the field. They were expected to use their resources for projects with specific frameworks, activities, and target groups, and using these resources for other purposes, no matter how urgent, required them to obtain permission from funding bodies and make amendments to grant agreements. This involved extensive correspondence and numerous face-to-face or online meetings, and due to the difficulties in communicating and cooperating between different specialised departments, it took a lot of time to act. Managing and coordinating a large group of field staff, technical experts, financial departments and directors also proved complicated. If the body in question was moreover affiliated or associated with an international organisation, cultural differences could come in as another complicating factor.

Consequently, while civil society organisations' capacities and activities greatly increased since 1999, it was precisely this increase in capacity that caused the bureaucratic inertia that prevented them from providing the urgent response needed in the 2023 earthquakes. Exceptions to this trend, such as the volunteer organisation AHBAP, had to limit the scope and nature of their activities to what was accepted

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by the state. This time, however, the expertise and experience of this organised civil society made a tremendous impact and filled unexpected roles in other areas.

Communities

Although the debates on civil society organisations flared up in the late 1990s, collective citizen movements have not been limited to this framework. Since the 1950s, solidarity networks necessitated by rural-urban migration have been a constant phenomenon in Turkey's political and social life. Closed identity-based communities, such as hometown associations and religious communities, are at the centre of clientelist political practices. In addition to these, there have been powerful mass mobilizations of citizens since the 90s: the local population's resistance against gold mining activities in Bergama, the "One Minute of Darkness" protests after the Susurluk Accident in which millions of people participated, the TEKEL workers' strike, the protests against hydroelectric power plants in different villages across Turkey, the Gezi Protests in 2013, and many more.

Despite increasing political repression, the number of communities, especially those not organised around any clear-cut identity, has increased rapidly over the past years. Food collectives, consumer movements, organisations in the field of culture and arts, neighbourhood forums and gatherings, and

associations forming around certain spaces have sprouted in every corner of Turkey. Though not united by a certain identity or a similar characteristic, people want to stand together for different reasons.

When the Kahramanmaraş Earthquakes occurred, these communities, who had great mutual trust and an experience and habit of working together, mobilised spontaneously even though they had neither the preparation nor the experience for dealing with such a disaster. They did not have to wait for instructions and/or permission like public institutions, nor did they have a scope of activities and bureaucratic procedures to adhere to like civil society organisations who were trapped in the straitjackets of their projects. Neighbour communities, sports clubs, art communities, tradesmen groups, alumni associations, supporter groups, hometown associations, and social media groups all joined forces and went into action. There was a great mobilisation around identifying needs and collecting and delivering aid. Even those who were not part of such communities took care to direct whatever help and support they wanted to offer to these communities.

Everyone got organised in an instant and tried to support the region: Artist collectives went to one of the provinces affected by the earthquakes with a stove and a cauldron and managed a huge tent settlement there, miners did extraordinary things in search and

rescue activities and later in humanitarian aid, victims of past earthquakes contributed their share, hometown associations organised truckloads of aid and delivered it to the region, and sports club supporters, alumni associations, and different WhatsApp communities helped to the best of their abilities. Solidarity networks, solidarity houses, associations and platforms established by these communities are now also trying to get involved in the reconstruction process.

Despite the fact that the central government's institutions and actors met these organisations with hesitation and disapproval, local governments both made room for these communities in their own work and did not refrain from supporting their activities. Thus, the Kahramanmaraş Earthquakes became the stage for a great mobilisation of citizens that did not occur around any institutional identity or organisational structure. This also shows the long way grassroots movements from the Bergama resistance to the Gezi Protests have come and the great potential they have amassed along this way.

Conclusion

In the quarter century between the disasters of 1999 and 2023, changes in Turkey's political and administrative scene reveal the importance of local and collective organisations. While the central government has become even more centralised in the meantime and civil society organisations have grown into bureaucratically complex structures, the municipalities who are willing to develop their cooperation and solidarity with the local population and the communities who have gained the experience and habit of working together are those that we can expect much more effective action. When we take these tragic experiences as our vantage point, this dynamism appears to be what will push Turkey's democratisation forward.