

## The Crisis of Civil Society in Turkey

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**Abstract.** This paper considers the state of civil society in Turkey in order to determine whether the Turkish government is involved in repressing the rights and freedoms of individual Turkish citizens. The paper is divided into six parts that include an introduction and conclusion. Part two discusses the various meanings of "civil society" over time and states that it is the current understanding of civil society, that of institutions and organizations outside of and autonomous of the domain of the state, that is of interest to the authors. As pointed out, if these organizations are able to function properly, then democracy and freedom of speech are enhanced. The next part discusses particular civil society organizations in Turkey and concludes that the state turns a deaf ear to those it does not favor or it discourages alternative ideas to its ideology—its version of secularism. Part four looks at the role of the state in the past in order to understand the legacy influencing the current situation. The authors point to the patrimonial structure inherited from the Ottomans described as a tradition in which the state has priority over civil society in order to prevent opposition and disunity. Bureaucratic centralization resulted. Part five considers the future of civil society in Turkey. The authors see the continuation of "divisiveness anxiety" on the part of the state leading to the demonizing of opposition movements. The paper concludes that Turkey has a long way to go before it achieves greater freedom and democracy and that the state needs to start opening channels of communication and embark on an honest and constructive dialogue with the civil society organizations in Turkey.

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**Key Words:** Turkey and Civil Society; Turkish Democracy; Civil Society.

### 1. Introduction

On 11 November 1997 Turkey's chief prosecutor, Vural Savas, told Turkey's Supreme Court that the country risked sliding towards an Islamic state unless the Islam-inspired Welfare Party was banned. He declared that "no other party deserves to be shut down by the

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court . . .as much as the Welfare Party" (*AP Online* 1997, November 11). In January 1998, the Welfare Party was completely shut down and its operation declared illegal. This development generated great fear, however, among Turkey's allies in the West. It was feared that this decision, to ban the Welfare Party, would create serious obstacles for Turkey's continuing efforts to establish a fully democratic society, which the West—at least officially—had encouraged for some time.

Before the final decision to ban the party had been made, for example, a spokesman for U. S. Secretary of State, Jim Foley, opined optimistically that the U. S. expected the court to issue a decision that would be consistent with democratic principles. He made the U. S. position very clear, "We would be concerned with any decision which ended up damaging confidence in Turkey's democratic multi-party system" (Kinzer, 1997b: p. 4). The highest-ranking judge in Turkey at the time, Yekta Güngör Özden, provided a hint as to the direction of future developments by strongly criticizing the United States for discouraging the Court from banning the Welfare Party. He asserted defiantly that "Turkey is not the 51st state of the United States" (Kinzer, 1997b: p.4).<sup>3</sup>

By December 1997, human rights issues in Turkey, especially those pertaining to political imprisonment, gained widespread attention in the Western media. There was the case of the blind lawyer, Esber Yagmurdeli, whose cause was supported by several European governments. Early in 1998 he was freed by the Turkish authorities. The same thinking was thought to apply to Leyla Zana, a member of Parliament in 1994. However, she was convicted of supporting Kurdish terrorism and was sentenced to a 15-year prison term.<sup>4</sup> These developments and others associated with obstacles to

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<sup>3</sup> As if to show the world community that nothing has changed in Turkey, the Virtue Party, established after the closure of the Welfare Party, was banned by the Constitutional Court on 22 June 2001 (*Zaman*, 2001, June 23).

<sup>4</sup> Relevant to this situation, the Human Rights Watch organization wrote in its Turkey, 2001 report that "the Turkish government made almost no progress on key human rights reforms in 2000 and failed to take advantage of the opportunity

and failures of the advancement of Turkish democracy brought discussions concerning the status of civil society in Turkey to the forefront.

Thus, this paper examines whether the Turkish state, given its ideological base of a laicism that has become too militant, has involved itself in the repression of the rights and freedoms of individual Turkish citizens. We hold that both militant laicism and Islamic radicalism oppose human rights and freedoms because they seek to impose their dictums on all of society's members, secular and religious alike. When these ideologies prevail, Turkey is left in a very difficult position, one in which the major political forces fail to endorse or respect the desire of most of the Turkish people to live in a democratic society where civil rights are fully respected. It is our hope to see in Turkey the development and consolidation of "democracy" in the form of the creation of a genuine "civil society," a society in which power ultimately lies in the hands (the votes) of the people.

## 2. Some Theoretical Considerations

Civil society, in its purest form, refers to the way in which the nature of democratic society has been conceptualized and structured in the West—Western Europe and the United States. Civil society in its modern form is a product of the political philosophy of these leading world powers. The term, however, has a long history, passing through several historical epochs or stages in which it has been interpreted differently by prominent Western philosophers. Aristotle, for example, may have been a supporter of Athenian democracy, but he was also a slave owner. With respect to the beginnings of European civil society, the work of Hobbes was extremely influential. He described—and lauded—a peaceful society that was based on the principle of protection by the Leviathan, his term for the state apparatus. De Tocqueville and Montesquieu were the most notable proponents of private civilian associations, which

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presented by a marked reduction in armed violence by illegal organizations." For more information see <http://www.hrw.org/wr2kl/europe/turkey.html> .

they saw as necessary for the endowment of civil virtues to the citizenry. Gramsci was a proponent of the grouping together of cultural institutions that would ensure the hegemony of the ruling class (Bellin, 1994: 509; Christenson, 1997: 727). Civil society, therefore, carries with it two distinct meanings. First, it represents an important developmental stage in the social history of Western Europe, and, second, it refers to a theoretical concept in the field of historical philosophy.

An historical analysis of the concept of civil society demonstrates that the growth of the bourgeoisie in the Middle Ages, both culturally and economically—which was the result of the increasing tendency towards urbanization—gave the term a new definition. The idea of civil society increasingly came to include an understanding of civil rights, especially with respect to institutions. The exercise of new freedoms that accompanied increasing urbanization represented a new way of life, and one which was becoming increasingly independent of the state. On a theoretical and philosophical level, a variety of intellectuals began to define civil/political society in diverse ways. An earlier distinction, popularized by Hobbes, between "natural" society, on the one hand—or humanity in its natural, uncivilized, form—and civil, or civilized, society, on the other, came to be replaced in time with the notion of civil society put forward by Hegel, which also emphasized the importance of the state as guarantor of civil harmony. Later, the term civil society came to be associated with bourgeois society, largely as a result of the increasing popularity of Marxist economic theory.

The work of Gramsci represented a turning point with respect to the philosophical understanding of civil society, especially with respect to the way in which the superstructure of society is composed of a conglomeration of institutions. Indeed, today, the principle of free association, participating in voluntary organizations, stands at the very core of our understanding of what constitutes public life in civil society. In its most modern definition, the term civil society has come to inherently suggest the idea of individual and/or group autonomy vis-à-vis the state. This autonomy from government

control has come to include not only specific groups or favored groups, but all groups within society—with the exception of criminal organizations. In a just society, therefore, where human and civil rights are fully respected, civil society is tantamount to political society (Karaman, 1990: 4-8). Freedom from political hegemony has emerged as the cornerstone of a democratic civil society. For Keane, for example, civil society represents the sum total of all of the voluntary economic and cultural institutions that are concerned with activities “outside of the domain of state,” and, if necessary, apply and/or exert different forms of pressure on the state, so as to maintain autonomy vis-à-vis the state (Keane, 1998: 14).

This current understanding of the nature of civil society in the West is of special significance for our purposes since it is this meaning of the term that has been introduced (or re-introduced) to the East only in the last quarter of this century. Over the course of this period, the Western understanding of civil society has gained prominence throughout most of the world. It has proven to be especially important with respect to the massive and rapid changes that have been experienced in Eastern Europe; it has also had a prominent impact on the so-called “chronically authoritarian” states and political societies of the East. Under the banner of democracy and waves of agitation to achieve it, the concept of civil society appeared on the agenda in the form of a reaction against dictatorial power. Civil society came to be associated with autonomous social units and organizations—voluntary associations, private companies, family homes, private and intellectual associations, etc.—as well as with freedom of public opinion in general. These social units or organizations that make up civil society are based on the principle of the recognition of basic human and civil rights. Rules are agreed upon by the society at large concerning acceptable levels and forms of economic competition as well as concerning voluntary and decentralized relations. This concept of civil society serves as the foundation for democratic theory as well. Civil society can be seen as the social basis of a free and pluralist democracy (Alpay, 1994: 19).

### 3. Civil Society in Turkey

With respect to the case of Turkey, we find it appropriate to propose a somewhat novel differentiation: between the "appearance" of free organization, on the one hand, and the "reality" of free organization on the other. In Turkey today, we have the former, but not the latter. Civil society in today's Turkey does appear to espouse the principle of free organization. We have not yet achieved, however, the full-fledged existence of civil society that exists in the West. Civil society in Turkey exists in name only; the people and the institutions, especially those of the less economically fortunate classes, do not have complete, unhampered freedom from the traditionally coercive, officially ideological, state bureaucracy. Discrimination still exists in Turkey, in an institutionalized fashion.

Our central thesis here is that—notwithstanding the fact that Turkey does [appear to] have a civil society on a superficial level with a plethora of non-governmental organizations that operate without any restrictions whatsoever—civil society remains underdeveloped and still constrained, to some extent, by the state. The Turkish state, with its almost "transcendental," coercive nature still reflects, or is reflected by, an official ideology. This official ideology serves to impede the development of a civil society that could function with complete freedom. The state allows—under the pretext of a democratic regime—the organizational appearance of civil society; it even encourages it. Yet, the dominance that the state exercises over individuals and groups in society results in the state very often turning a deaf ear to those groups that it does not favor. It responds on a selective basis; it does not react in an egalitarian fashion to the different demands coming from the diverse institutions of civil society. One can observe, for example, the close relationship that exists between the inner circles of state power and certain big business associations, most prominently TÜSIAD (the Association of Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen). The government tends to respond to those sectors of society that help it to maintain its flow of income. One need only contrast the way in which the government courts big business with the treatment given to other sectors of civil society, most notably to MÜSIAD (the Association of Independent

Businessmen), to understand the level of discrimination involved in the government's treatment of civic organizations. It can be seen that the relationships that make up the fabric of all Middle Eastern societies are maintained on the basis of a variety of forms of official discrimination. This pressing hegemony by government elites, often referred to as the "strong state," serves to "hinder the making of effective civil society" (Heper, 1992: 189). Turkish society, therefore, is not a freely functioning civil society—not by a long shot.

So far, we have considered only the negative side of the picture. The purpose of this article, however, is not to claim that there is a total absence of civil society, but, rather, to underscore the way in which it has not yet achieved a truly functional level. Indeed, one cannot claim that civil society does not exist, institutionally at least. While it is true that the 1980 military intervention "set out to destroy the institutions of civil society," paradoxically, it "helped to strengthen the commitment to civilian politics, consensus-building, civil rights, and issue-oriented associational activities" (Toprak, 1996: 95). It can easily be observed that the revitalization of civil society has not been restricted to intellectual circles only, but has spread throughout different segments of society through the blossoming activity of numerous associations. According to recent data, "at present, there are 54,987 non-governmental associations in Turkey that are active" (Toprak, 1996: 104). What is more, this plethora of organizations in civil society embraces almost all segments of the society, incorporating people from all walks of life, with widely disparate world-views, while, at the same time, these organizations have become increasingly issue-oriented, as distinct from the ideological orientations that characterized the organizations of the 1970s.

At this point, it might be useful to name at least a few particularly notable examples of non-governmental organizations along the broad spectrum of existing associations with activities that are mushrooming as never before. These associations can be characterized and grouped under several domains, those from traditional organizations to more recently developed ones:

i) First, in the traditional domains of civil society, there are three major confederations of labor unions (Türk-Is, Hak-Is, and DISK) as well as one formed more recently by civil servants (KESK). They duly represent many large and small unions, representing laborers from many a field of the work force--private or public. In addition, there are the organizations that are dedicated to the concerns of big business: from the oldest TÜSIAD, to the relatively new MÜSIAD, an acronym for Islamist businessmen, as well as the Genç Isadamlari Dernegi (Association of Young Businessmen).

ii) Another traditional domain is that of private organizations related to the mass media. In addition to the press and publishers, there are countless companies working in the media sector. Of particular importance are the burgeoning private TV and radio stations that are slowly forcing changes in the legal norms established earlier on under the monopoly of state control that was exercised over institutions in this field.

iii) More issue-oriented and hence more conspicuous examples of non-governmental organizations are the following: a. organizations concerned with human rights such as the İnsan Haklari Dernegi (the Human Rights Association), an organization formed early on dating from as far back as 1946 (its activities invariably disquieting to the political authorities), the Türkiye İnsan Haklari Vakfi (the Turkish Human Rights Foundation), and, more recently, MAZLUM-DER (Organization of Human Rights & Solidarity for Oppressed People) formed mainly by people emphasizing Islamic thinking; b. women's organizations: the Türk Kadınlar Birliği (the Turkish Women's Union), the Kadın Haklarini Koruma Dernegi (the Association for the Protection of Women Rights), the Hanimlar Egitim ve Kültür Vakfi (the Foundation for Women's Education and Culture), Mor Çati Vakfi (the Purple Roof Foundation for Women's Shelter), especially distinguished by its provision of havens for abused women, as well as several other, more radical, or feminist organizations; and c. environmental organizations: in addition to the traditional Dogal Hayati Koruma Dernegi (the Association for the Protection of Wildlife), there is now the Türkiye Çevre Sorunlari Vakfi (the Turkish Environmental Problems Foundation), TEMA, (the Turkish

Foundation for Combating Soil Erosion, for Reforestation, and the Protection of Natural Habitats), others like it and, of special significance, the Yesiller Partisi (the Green Party), not yet legally approved of by the authorities.

iv) Other non-governmental organizations have sprung from special concerns related to culture, ethnicity, and/or ideology, they include: a. associations concerned with ethnic and cultural identity, for example, the legally short-lived Kürt Enstitüsü (the Kurdish Institute) and a succession of parties that have attempted to appeal to Kurdish citizens; several associations, together with *Cemevleri*, centers used for Alawi rituals, that try to address the concerns of the Alawites as distinguished from the larger population of Sunnis; b. new and vibrant organizations formed by segments of society generally interested in Islamic thought and practice along with a revival of *tariqa*-like organizations. Also, of this type, of special importance are Islamic organizations devoted to banking and other economic functions, along with more and more foundation-based efforts involved in cultural, educational, and service activities; and c. organizations supporting secularism, under the assumption that partisan secularism represents a special cultural concern. The following associations can be said to fall under this category: the Çagdas Yasami Destekleme Dernegi (the Association for the Support of Modern Lifestyle), Atatürkçü Düşünce Dernegi (the Association for Atatürkist Thought), and the Çagdas Egitim Vakfi (the Modern Education Foundation).

#### 4. Looking Back in Order to Look Forward

In Turkey, the organization of civil society has traditionally lagged far behind that of official governmental organization—ever since the imperial period—in terms of the interests expressed, the functions carried out, and even the timing involved in the appearance of organizations. The main reason why civil society has not developed to a level of full functionality is that freedom and autonomy have been limited by those in power, as is more generally the case throughout the Middle East. In other words, because of significant deficiencies

and/or inadequacies, the so-called democratic structure of the Turkish state has not provided an adequate base upon which all strata of society can determine their own ways of living free from the domination of the state apparatus. This situation results from the patrimonial structure inherited from the Ottomans, a tradition in which the state has a certain priority over civil society. As a matter of fact, however, the Ottoman statesmen and intellectuals seeking modernization and political reform in the years following 1839 were successful in winning certain liberties that resulted in a more civilized society. The reforms of those times left the structures of state power intact, however, and since those reformers saw themselves as unified with the state; they did not seek to undermine or even limit state control. As a result, they helped to create an elitist political society that hindered the progress of civil society (Frey, 1965: 303; Özbudun, 1996: 133-57). Since this legacy was followed by those founding the Turkish Republic also, civil society has continued to exist primarily in name only, especially with respect to the one-party rule of the Republican period.

Students of Turkish politics are generally quick to criticize the bureaucratic centralist tradition, or the hierarchical ordering of political society. This is often viewed as the central historical problem of Turkish society, indeed, not only in the Ottoman period but also—perhaps even more so—in the Republican period, given the way in which the founding elite of the Republic inherited and fully endorsed the traditional structure of the relationship between state and society (Belge, n.d.: 168-69). As a result, Turkey has long been characterized by a duality and/or gap between civil society on the one hand, and the state on the other. This duality continued throughout the Republican period and is still with us today.

The following words of a distinguished Turkish sociologist are especially worthy of consideration since they guide us to a better understanding of the continuity of the authoritarian tradition and the historical weakness of civil society with respect to the question of progress towards democratization:

[In Ottoman society] there were no institutional political privileges and immunities, all Ottoman citizens stood in a direct rather than a mediated relationship to the supreme authority. This missing link we call 'civil society.' It could be expected that Turkey would encounter difficulties in the development of modern democracy to the extent that this depends on this missing link. Marx's emphasis on the 'empirically real contradiction' of state and society is still difficult for Turkish thinkers to understand, for the contradiction is not a datum of the Turkish experience. The ideology of Kemalism denies it (Mardin, 1969: 279).

Keeping this philosophical view in mind, it is possible to see the development of civil society in the West as only one important stage in the West's social history. It may well be said that, in the case of Turkey, attempts to meet the need for non-governmental institutions and practices, which provided the necessary foundation for civil society in the West, were initiated by the state itself during the presidency of Atatürk. He not only maintained the trend towards modernization that had begun late in the Ottoman era, but he accelerated it, moving rapidly towards Westernization on numerous fronts. As a result, civil society appeared to be developing rapidly, at least in form if not function, by means of the regulatory initiatives of the state in the early years following the foundation of the Republic. This point of view is widely endorsed, as can be seen in the following statement from a political scientist in her study of the issue: "The development of civil society is partially contingent upon a state tradition which rests on a bureaucracy that recruits its personnel on the basis of merit and functions on the basis of universal legal norms; a separation of religion from the state, which ensures freedom of thought and belief and equal treatment before the law; and the guarantee of civil rights. While Turkey has problems in each of these areas, the foundation for the development of civil society was laid by the state"(Toprak, 1996: 87).

From this perspective, the institutions of civil society can, perhaps, accurately be said to have started, at least in a nominal sense, after the foundation of the Republic. Civil society, according

to its modern definition, however, is integrally related to the process of democratization; therefore, theoretically speaking, it cannot be created by the state itself. This creates a dilemma that is both theoretical and practical at the same time. If one accepts the idea that the state has created civil society, then it seems to follow that the state also has the capacity to mold the nature of civil society according to its preferences, as long as a bureaucratic centralist approach continues to prevail within the system. In other words, the requirement for the development of a genuine civil society, in its most modern democratic sense, would be that the state that created the civil society should surrender its ultimate power to the people, thereby becoming the servant of its own creation.

The institutions of Turkish civil society gained momentum with the establishment of multi-party politics. This was a critical turning point, a watershed in Turkish history. However, this development was insufficient for the development of civil society in its most modern, functional, and democratic form. Labor unions serve as a particularly good example of the way in which the non-governmental organizations of Turkish civil society fail to meet the criteria of civil society outlined above. According to Gramsci, the private labor organizations of civil society that have emerged in the West represent fully independent organizations of the working class, and they exist outside of the state structure. In Turkey, however, they are established only within restricted areas with pre-determined boundaries (Karaman, 1990: 10-11). What is more, since regulations have been imposed that serve to restrict the development of civil society, especially with respect to labor organizations, restrictions that continue until today, the function of labor unions, as agents of civil society, continues to be seriously limited. Therefore, as the example of labor unions implies, if one accepts the idea that civil society has been promoted by the state, then this would suggest that the state is entitled to have arbitrary control over its continuing development. The crucial point here is that state control limits the full functionality of civil society, and, therefore, one could argue that this arbitrary state control renders the very existence of civil society conceptually meaningless.

Over the course of time, especially following the close of the Second World War, it was increasingly thought that the opportunity for the achievement of a genuine pluralist democracy—based on the power of the middle class, political freedom, and respect for individual rights—was at hand. At that time, in Turkey, a new party came into office and made critical changes in the structure of state-society relations. Accordingly, in this new period of multi-party rule, the barriers standing in the way of progress towards the development of civil society seemed to be greatly reduced, although it was clear that the ideal civil society—as outlined above—had not yet been achieved. This process was briefly interrupted by the military coup of 1960. The new Constitution, promulgated after the coup, however, was thought to have created a legal framework that guaranteed greater levels of freedom; therefore, the coup was regarded by many—even in leftist circles—as distinct from similar military interventions that served to impose military dictatorships. It can be cogently argued that the coup did lead to some progress in terms of legal distinctions, but, in reality, it did little to promote the flowering of civil society in the fullest sense. Those responsible for the coup continued to operate within the persistent elitist tradition that understands the state to be predominant over civil society. This elitist tradition was also reflected in the new constitution by the presence of what can be described as an "official" ideology. What is perhaps most significant, however, is that the coup itself must be regarded as anti-democratic, especially insofar as it initiated a new tradition of military intervention in Turkish politics; hence, it stood in direct contradiction to the very idea of the progress of civil society.

The term civil society was rediscovered by the Turkish intellectual milieu beginning in the 1980s, in the aftermath of the last, overt military intervention that suspended the democratic process, temporarily, once again. Along with this intervention, as if history was repeating itself, a new constitution was prepared and promulgated under the aegis of military leaders who continued to uphold the elitist tradition. The principal concern of this new constitution, its predominant emphasis, was on the protection of the state and the survival of the regime. The new constitution, in addition, included prohibitive clauses with respect to almost every article related to

individual rights and freedoms. Under such a legal framework, it is quite clear that civil society is still far from achieving a functional or authentic existence.

## 5. The Future of Turkish Civil Society: Problems and Prospects

The main obstacles that continue to impede progress towards a more authentic and truly functional civil society can be classified under five different categories, all of which are a result of state hegemony over civil society. These include an unstable democratic process, bureaucratic centralization, intolerance of political opposition, state dominance over (or lack of respect for) civil rights and freedoms, and the ideological structure of state control.

There is a direct correlation, from a liberal perspective, between the weakness of civil society, on the one hand, and the unstable although continuing progress towards democracy in Turkey on the other. This problematic relation results mainly from the gap that remains between the state and society. The highly visible predominance of appointed over elected officials—perpetuated by the ongoing constitutional-administrative system—stands at the forefront of the government's resistance to democratic change. The restrictions and prohibitions imposed by the government have been successful in fulfilling their intended function of depoliticizing society by limiting the range of political participation. This is true with respect to relationships at all levels within the government itself, the political parties, and the organizations of "civil society." If one considers equality of opportunity for political participation to be essential to the formation of democracy, it becomes painfully clear and very easy to understand the extent to which the formation of a truly functioning civil society is yet to be reached in Turkey.

Even a casual look at the history of opposition movements in Turkey reveals the fact that the ruling elite in the post-Republican period inherited and has fully endorsed the traditional attitude towards political opposition that dates back to pre-Republican, i.e. Ottoman times. As is most succinctly argued by Mardin: "Turkish

political culture has an intrinsic, fierce enmity towards the concept of opposition,” which results from a psychological position, “that can be described as divisiveness anxiety” (Mardin, 1991: 180). Successive governments have adopted this attitude so as to maintain the tradition of state dominance over society. The accusation of betrayal and/or separatism is the most common one in the history of persecution/repression of political opposition since the early years of the Turkish Republic. This political attitude, which has long characterized state tradition, continues to hinder the development of an authentic and functional democracy and, hence, the development of Turkish civil society. Since the early years of the republic, the government has protected itself from any serious opposition on the part of civil society by banning political parties that it perceives to be threatening, or potentially threatening. This was the case, for example, with the Progressive Republican Party (founded in 1924), the Free Party (1930), the Socialist Laborer and Peasant’s Party of Turkey (1946), the Nation Party (1948), the Fatherland Party (1954), the Worker’s Party of Turkey (1961), the National Order Party (1970), the Socialist Party (1988), the United Communist Party of Turkey (1990), the People’s Labor Party (1990), the Socialist Turkey Party (1992), and the Democratic Party (1993).

The above-mentioned tradition of demonization of political opposition has long been complemented by a mentality of bureaucratic centralization, reinforced by a philosophy of social control espoused by Turkey’s traditional bureaucratic classes. According to this mentality “the society should be governed; it is the state which will do it, and it is the bureaucrat who will represent the state.” Furthermore, “what is sought after is indeed to gain control of strategic positions in the society and to maintain that control” (Mardin, 1992: 134). This policy of political absolutism was especially prominent during the period of one-party politics in Turkey, and, sadly, this tradition persevered through succeeding periods of multi-party politics. In light of this tradition of political absolutism, it would be an error to focus exclusively on the question of bureaucratic centralization as the most important obstacle to progress towards a functional democracy and, hence, civil society.

In addition to the issues discussed so far, one could point to several other conspicuous—and related—obstacles that stand in the way of progressive political development in Turkey. Foremost among them, perhaps, is the widespread lack of respect for internationally recognized civil rights and freedoms. This is an acute problem with respect to both individual and group autonomy. In short, there is an acute and fundamental lack of respect for civil rights as a whole.

With respect to this issue, one can trace a theoretical framework, or, in other words, a semantic map, as follows. If the state exists to promote and protect the welfare of individual citizens and groups—and not the reverse—then, from a liberal perspective, the basic function of the state would be merely to provide the legal and administrative arrangements necessary to sustain and protect the pluralistic arrangements created by those individuals and groups; it would serve by honoring and respecting the differences that exist in the domain of private civilian life. In other words, state interference in civil society would be limited only to the resolution of conflicts that arise within civil society, thereby safeguarding the existence and integrity of civil society. With this theoretical perspective in mind, in the case of Turkey, the central impediment to the development of fully harmonious state-society relations is the lack of freedom of thought and expression. This should not be surprising to those fully cognizant of the fact that in Turkey one part of the court system, as its very name of "state security courts" indicates, is painstakingly institutionalized, and invariably functions, so as to secure the state's primacy over individual citizens.

Of course, it is not at all contradictory to the requirements for an authentic civil society for the state to take preventive measures against civil unrest or violence, according to due legal and administrative arrangements. Yet, and here exists a subtle distinction of great importance, a threshold of state interference in civil affairs must be democratically established—and it must not to be exceeded. In the case of Turkey, to realize such a state of affairs would require a political climate in which the fundamental freedom of expression, along with other civil rights, would be fully and

unambiguously respected—for this is the quintessential indicator of the very existence of civil society.

However, at this time in Turkey there are problems with respect to freedom of expression. Several intellectuals are still in prison only because they expressed what they thought, or, committed the crime of reciting part of a poem that did not sit well with the powers that be!<sup>5</sup> This situation severely damages Turkey's democratic image abroad, especially insofar as it is able to successfully respond to international pressures. This tension is reflected in a recent *New York Times* article that declared that “prisoners, including those convicted of aiding terrorism, are freed when foreign pressure demands it” (Kinzer, 1997a: p.10). These overtures on the part of the state in response to international pressure seem highly superficial, however, given the way in which the state remains indifferent to the demands of civil society in Turkey, employing only temporary solutions and making only token gestures.

Finally, the political impotence of civil society that continues as a result of Turkey's state-centered tradition of power is continually reinforced by the perpetuation of an official ideology established over time and grounded in the constitution<sup>6</sup> and further propagated by those segments of society who closely associate themselves with this official ideology. In fact, for the state to endorse any official ideology stands as an ironclad barrier, in and of itself, to the development of an authentic civil society. Official ideology, by definition, leads to intolerance to alternative thoughts and beliefs (even identities). Turkey's political authorities are instinctively reactionary with respect to protecting the state from the influence of at least certain sections of the civil society at large. The establishment of an official

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<sup>5</sup> The mayor of Istanbul—the most populous city of Turkey—Recep Tayyip Erdogan was prosecuted and sentenced for reading passages from a poem written by Ziya Gökalp. It is a widely known fact that Gökalp's ideas were very popular among the founding fathers of Turkey.

<sup>6</sup> The problematic nature of this issue, as regards the development of civil society, has drawn the attention of other scholars and has been dealt with by them at some length. For one prominent example, see (Kuzu, 1992: 350).

ideology has led to a "security-first" state which "has evolved at the expense of civil society and basic human rights, with the result that the maturation of Turkish civil and democratic society lags far behind the country's level of economic and social development" (Yavuz, 1997: 26).

The state-supported media campaign in the middle of 1999 against Fethullah Gülen, a foremost religious figure who has become a focus of wide public attention in Turkey, demonstrates the way in which civic movements run into conflict with the state. Gülen's movement seems to have no aspiration to evolve into a political party or seek political power. To the contrary, he represents the continuation of a long Sufi tradition of seeking to address the spiritual needs of the people, to educate the masses, and to provide some stability in a time of turmoil. Like many previous Sufi figures (including the towering thirteenth-century figure, Jalal ad-Din Rumi), he is wrongly accused of seeking political power. The unique character of Gülen's movement lies in its attempt to revitalize traditional values through the state's official modernization program. Gülen's emergence on the political scene has triggered much controversy among those who consider themselves to be the guardians of official ideology, a considerable number of whom suspect him of using a variety of manipulative tactics to bring power to bear on the state. They worry that behind his benign facade, Gülen hides ambitions to turn the country into an Iranian-style Islamic state. The insecurity and intolerance on the part of the secular establishment has led them into an unsubstantiated and ill-founded accusation that Gülen's community represents an enemy of the Turkish republic. The very existence of an official ideology ensures that political power is granted to some segments of civil society, while isolating or marginalizing many others. It goes without saying that such a state, operating under such an ideological structure, cannot ever serve as the government of an authentic civil society.

One other note-worthy example of this contradiction is the ongoing official discriminatory attitude towards different non-governmental organizations that represent specific socio-political or cultural concerns. This is illustrated very clearly, on the one hand, by

the benevolent attitude towards partisan secularist associations, foremost among them the Association for Atatürkist Thought, and on the other, an exceedingly intolerant (even hostile) attitude towards particular human right associations, especially the Human Rights Association and more recently the *Mazlum-Der*.

We feel that it is important to mention one more very special case of the relationship between the establishment and civic organizations. An *ad hoc* coalition of a limited number of non-governmental organizations that survived through 1997 and 1998 and came to be referred to as the "Civil Initiative of the Five," appeared on the stage of Turkish political life along with the so-called 28 February process. This process began with the 28 February 1997 meeting of the National Security Council where Necmettin Erbakan, the Prime Minister and the leader of the Welfare Party, was warned to take certain measures or face the consequences. Despite its attempts to offer a compromise, the Welfare Party led coalition government was overthrown by an ostensibly legal action on the part of the military echelon of the power elite working along with the five non-governmental organizations discussed below. Both domestic and external enemies (and friends as well) were redefined (Özcan and Kut, 1999: 22-23). The ramifications of the meeting were also pointed out by Aras and Bacik (2000: 51) when they stated that "since the military coup of 1980, nothing has been as divisive in Turkish political life as the National Security Council decisions of 28 February 1997. Following the critical National Security Council meeting, the army re-emphasized its supremacy over political life." The five organizations that carried out the "Civil Initiative of the Five" included paradoxically two labor union confederations, Türk-İs (the Turkish Confederation of Labor Unions) and DISK (the Confederation of Revolutionary Labor Unions), as well as one employers' confederation, TİSK (the Turkish Confederation of Employers Unions), and two relatively middle-class career organizations, TOBB (the Union of the Turkish Chambers of Commerce and Stock Markets) and TESK (the Tradesmen and Artisan's Confederation of Turkey). This coalition represented something novel, and it suggested a somewhat paradoxical peculiarity, as far as the authentic existence/functioning of civil

society is concerned. It is of special interest to us for two reasons. First, it represents a coalition of two kinds of civil society organizations that represent diverse, often clashing, interests and which have, heretofore, been unable to forge such alliances with each other, let alone with the state. This coalition served to demonstrate that it is possible to negotiate, to some extent, with a part of the official establishment and to come to an understanding with it. It also illustrates the paternalism of the establishment. This civil society grouping became an official client of the state. We might call it a "civil society of the political state."

## 6. Conclusion

The picture that has been drawn in this work is indeed a bleak one. Nevertheless, there is hope, located in the ongoing appearance and increasing strength of Turkey's non-governmental organizations. Still, the strength of these organizations may seem more impressive at first glance than is the case in reality. Turkey has a long way to go in its quest for the development of an authentic civil society that is fully democratic and that has its fundamental human rights duly respected by the government. In brief, the principal problems are an unstable democratic process, rigid bureaucratic centralization, intolerance toward opposition, state repression of civil rights and freedoms, and the perpetuation of a state ideology.

Throughout the 1990s, fueled by the 28 February process, which served as a civic façade for a soft military intervention, the main obstacle to the further development of Turkish civil society has been the state's unwillingness to respond to the demands of the people. The state's reluctance to create channels of communication with its own civilian population prevents observers from being optimistic about the development and consolidation of civil society in Turkey. The state's refusal to embark on an honest and constructive dialogue with the organizations of civil society in Turkey has dire implications for Turks of all walks of life. The state, according to the logic of its official ideology, uses all of the resources at its disposal to maintain

ultimate authority. It seeks to perpetuate a homogenous nation-state that dominates civil society at large. To cite but one very graphic example, the ongoing coercive regulation of banning the free exercise of the right of women to wear headscarves in public—which is completely unacceptable according to internationally recognized human rights—was even applied to a member of Parliament. To make matters even worse (and even more complicated), this regulation has been defended on behalf of the state, under the auspices of its official ideology, by an elected member of the political elite who paradoxically happens to be a leader of a leftist political party, labeled as "democratic." This illustrates, quite tragically, the distance that Turkey must travel in what will be a long march towards freedom, democracy, and the creation of a civil society wherein the people can become the masters of their own destiny.

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