



As developments in Turkey continue to take shape in the aftermath of Gezi and Erdoğan's Presidential election, Gülden Ozcan interviews Simten Coşar (co-editor with [Gamze Yücesan-Özdemir of *Silent Violence: Neoliberalism, Islamic Politics and the AKP Years in Turkey*. Red Quill Books, 2012](#)) about these turbulent times. Interest in the AKP and its integration of neoliberal and Islamic politics into continued electoral success has garnered increasing scrutiny both domestically and internationally.

RQ: *Silent Violence* (Red Quill Books, 2012) was recently published in Turkish. Given recent developments, especially after Gezi, we thought it is time to revisit the current social and political dynamics in Turkey. Let's begin with the title of your book. Your edited book is entitled "Silent Violence" but has the AKP's violence remained silent?

SC: As we were co-editing *Silent Violence* with Gamze Yücesan-Özdemir, the policy options that characterized the AKP's style of politics, the party's way of governing, and its

discursive strategies, all exemplified silent violence, inherent in neoliberalism and Islamist sensitivities. The edited volume covered the first decade of the AKP's rule. The book, on the one hand, was mainly concerned with the increasing electoral success the party has achieved in three subsequent elections. On the other hand, we problematized the way to the party's rise to power, its process of accumulating institutional power, and how its policy preferences have been interpreted among the academic and intellectual circles in Turkey and abroad. Briefly, we tried to explore the structural factors delimiting academic/intellectual analysis and discussions on the AKP's political and ideological identity to such dichotomies as the modern-traditional, civil-military, secular-Islamist, and liberal-authoritarian.

Aside from the party's strategic manoeuvres to establish its power base at the institutional and societal levels and the prospects that these manoeuvres hinted at, the delimitation of analysis to these dichotomies enhanced the AKP's accumulation of power throughout the decade. Besides, it also



CITE AS: Cosar, Simten. 2014. "Turkey After Gezi." Red Quill Books Interview Series #1. Interviewed by Red Quill Books. Posted on Sep 24.

helped overlook the party's tendency toward authoritarian options in dealing with political and social opposition, to opportunism in getting to terms with the then establishment (i.e., Kemalist regime and the rather traditionalized involvement of the military in politics). Then and now we have been using the metaphor silent violence in terms of at times contradictory policy preferences required by the neoliberal transformation processes in general and that defined the AKP governments' agendas and the silencing effect of these contradictions on state violence. The alleged contradiction in AKP's discursive practices between the party's approach to women's bodies from a moralistic viewpoint and/or its exclusion and marginalization of feminist politics on moralistic grounds on the one hand, and the AKP governments' assent to enact legal arrangements for struggling against violence against women, in a rather rhetorical "dialogue" with women's rights organizations is an example in silencing the violence that is embedded in the party's record in governing. Likewise, the total liquidation of the social rights on the grounds of a claim to individual rights and liberties attests to another instance of this silencing effect. Or, in the case of "packages of opening" that refer mainly to the AKP governments' dealing with the "Kurdish issue" the inclusion or exclusion of Kurdish organizations — on the will of the government — offers a similar example. Lastly, the co-existence of the AKP governments' claim to deepening democracy by means of disabling the military's hand on civilian politics on the one hand, and the enactment of legal regulations that increased

the authority and mandate of the police forces as early as the party's first term in government signifies the pendulum on which the AKP had long dwelled. But the government's response to the social resistance—with a claim to the public—that was first sparked in the end of May 2013 in Taksim Square in İstanbul and then spreaded throughout the country, and which hinted at the citizens' active claim to the public hints at the fact that Turkey has recently entered into a stage where structural violence can no longer be silenced down; perhaps because its main actor no longer needs to do so to survive; quite contrary.

RQ: Can we say that the Gezi Resistance was a test case for AKP's claim to democracy? If so, do you think that the AKP government passed this test?

SC: I think that the Gezi Resistance was more a test case for those analysts, academics, intellectuals, opinion leaders in Turkey and abroad who have long persisted in arguing for the democratic credentials of the AKP's discursive practices. As for the AKP, it can be argued that the party has tactfully played in the liberal democratic rhetoric while outspokenly emphasizing its conservative tendencies. It has consistently underlined its conception of democracy in terms of keeping the military not "outside" the political sphere, but under the control of civilian governments, representing the national will.

So, underlying the AKP's claim to democracy was the challenge to the military for representing the national will. Its

emphasis on tolerance, dialogue and negotiation in politics, especially in its first term in government was basically framed with a view to Turkey's European accession process—which seems to have lost its significance in the AKP governments' agendas since 2007—and prioritized the free market mentality in pursuing politics. This being so, I would argue that it is not the AKP's claim to democracy that was put to test during the Gezi Resistance, but the perception of the party as a democratizing force in Turkey's politics. At first sight this perception—held mainly by the liberals in Turkey and liberals and conservatives abroad seemed to rest on the opposition to military's almost habitual involvement in politics in Turkey. Yet it was basically founded on the belief in the free marketization of everything related to politics. In this respect, it can be argued that the AKP has continued to be appealing to the liberal circles in its consistent commitment to neoliberal policy preferences. That is why, one can assume, that the AKP government's violent reaction to the Gezi Resistance—which is no more silent at all—led to a (in some cases hesitant, in others decisive) distancing among the liberal democratic circles, while some of the staunch liberals—with no prefixes, and side by side with the prominent conservatives of the country—continued to act as spokespersons of the government in justifying its excessive use of police forces. Finally, I would argue the litmus case for the AKP's claim to democracy has always been the gender issue—through which the AKP's authoritarian tendencies have already been revealed. The Gezi Resistance, on the other

hand, provided the grounds for testing the validity of this litmus test while at the same time offering the venue where the violence inherent in the party's decade-long rule that ensured the consolidation of neoliberal structure in Turkey became manifest. It further fixed the AKP's prioritization of majoritarian democracy with an emphasis on the national will. It was the liberal and liberal democratic supporters of the party who were given the democracy test by the Resistance. For the time being it is possible to note that most of the liberals failed the test.

RQ: Do you think Turkey under the AKP rule still constitutes a role model for the Islamic countries in the region? For example, do you think radical organizations such as ISIS are providing a basis for Erdogan's AKP to re-gain some its international prestige lost after the Gezi Resistance?

SC: "If role model" means a role model for democratization I doubt whether Turkey under the AKP rule has ever been in that status. Actually, the AKP's terms in government coincided with the reshaping of the Middle East, and the AKP government's foreign policy preferences have generally been framed in terms of getting the best out of the prospective pie with an overemphasis on Ottoman past and Islamic past. This was manifested in the persistent emphasis on assuming a leading role not only in the Middle East, but the whole Islamic world. Certainly, this emphasis was reflected mainly in foreign trade policies. Among the many examples, elaborated in Birgül

Demirtaş's contribution to *Silent Violence*, the use of Turkish Airlines as a foreign policy-cum-commerce instrument (though in the case of relation with countries in the African continent) is the most vivid manifestation of this prioritization.

I am not a foreign policy specialist; thus, just with a political science perspective I would argue that reference to Ottoman and Islamic past is nearly a futile attempt. First, the Middle East as we used to know it emerged out of the Ottoman lands, but it is doubtful that the Ottoman Empire occupies a desirable space in the memories of the peoples in the region. Second, Turkey's traditionalized alliance with the USA and Israel in the region also puts barriers for the country in assuming a leading role. Third and related to the radical Islamist organizations in the region and especially to the ISIS, the AKP governments' rather inactive response points at a bleak picture. In the first and second terms of the AKP in government this question might have invited positive answers among the supporters of the AKP, who opted for a civilian government with no radical Islamic tendencies; yet when the third term of the party in government is concerned, the increasing tune of Sunni-Islam in the party's preferences—especially in education and urban policies, with direct connotations in everyday life—that fit well into the increase in the visibility of authoritarian style of politics among the governmental circles belie such an assessment. It might sound ironic that a party, which had tried hard to convince those among the populace who were anxious about the party's "hidden

intentions"—i.e., establishing a (pro-)Sharia regime in the country—and most importantly the laicist elite and the military that it has no Islamist aspirations in politics, that it is a "conservative democratic" party—a label that the party quickly discarded after its first electoral victory in 2002—that it is for democratization in order to ensure peaceful coexistence of differences in the society, today overtly promotes Sunni-Islamization in the country. However, it is not the AKP that should be taken as the first and foremost actor in this process. For, it was with the military interim regime (1980-1983) following the 1980 coup d'état, which first initiated the process. So the AKP manipulated the already Islamizing societal structure to consolidate its power through appeals to civilian politics, national will, and Sunni Islam, the latter two, merging into majoritarian democracy. As a last word I should note that the radical Islamist organizations in the Middle East have been evolving out of a history of armed conflict. The AKP on the other hand emerged out of a long tradition of non-violent, legal party politics, and acquired police power through the state mechanism. Thus, the comparison which might lead one to opt for the AKP's—now Islamic—rule in the face of the risk of such radical organizations as ISIS is likely to fall out of place. The Gezi Resistance, which as I mentioned earlier displayed how far the government can go in using the police force evinces this fact.

RQ: How did Islam get integrated in global capital in Turkey in the first place?

SC: This question is challenging to answer in interview format. Still, and briefly: It is no secret that neoliberalism was introduced to Turkey in the late 1970s. The socio-political structure and the state structure then were not fit for the easy adoption of neoliberal policy preferences. A major restructuration was needed and the 1980 *coup d'état* offered the grounds for this re-structuration process. The coup leaders claimed that they stepped in to mend the dysfunctional political structure, to devise a political frame that would cleanse the threats to the Republican order. It was a fact that the late 1970s were marked by social and political turmoil; the parliament and governments could not function at all. But the decade and the 1960s were also marked by the development of leftist opposition, student movements, and fertile political grounds for structural change. 1980 coup d'état should be understood in this frame, not merely in terms of the failure of parliamentary politics, but also and more importantly in terms of the rise of the leftist opposition, and with special reference of the crisis of capitalism in the late 1970s. Thus the coup and the following military regime, both of which proved to be the most violent of the military's active presence in governing the country, silenced down opposition and pre-empted the possibilities for structural opposition. This was achieved both by means of direct suppression and incessant use of military force and through a series of legal regulations. The latter also prepared the country for the neoliberalization process that took more than three decades to consolidate—under the AKP rule.

The neoliberalization process was accompanied by the increase in the influence of Sunni Islam not only among the populace at the state level. It was the coup leaders themselves who acknowledged the importance of Sunni Islam for Turkey—as a binding force among the populace. It was during the military regime when religious courses (on Sunni Islam) were made compulsory in primary and secondary education. When the transition to civilian politics was realized in 1983, all the political parties—which were approved to be eligible for entering the general elections by the military—disclaimed the past two decades and related ideological stances, with a claim to center identity—meaning, moderately nationalist, moderately conservative, moderately authoritarian and pro-free market. In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s these features were tuned with liberal resort to civil society—mainly considered in the dominant imagination of the period as apolitical, non-ideological, individual-based voluntary involvement in social issues with the principles of negotiation, toleration and consensus. The rise of Islamic—not Islamist—organizations with the claim to a share from the newly emerging accumulation fit well into this frame. It was especially in the late 1980s and through the 1990s that one could observe the gradual increase of Islamic organizations both in number and visibility, which claimed to stand at a distance not only to radical politics—associated with Islamist political organizations, which opt for a change in the republican regime on religious grounds—but politics in the general sense. Thus, one can note the increasing effectiveness of one

of the most famous Islamic communities, Fethullah Gülen movement—widely known as Hizmet, “the Service” in Turkish—, in the same period among the political parties of the center, which did not have a direct claim to political power. The claim was more to the adoption of liberal values—toleration, negotiation, consensus—for religious life styles, religious practices in the public sphere, and visibility through religious symbols; related but before that, it was for having a share in the new accumulation regime that was yet to consolidate in the country. In this respect, the Anatolian Tigers, as they were called by the first center-right government of the post-coup period is a vivid example.

With the three-decade-long neoliberalization processes in the country, carried by the political parties of the centre and experiencing periodic “mini-” crisis due to the country’s socio-political and cultural dynamics, as well as to the fluctuations in the neoliberal world order in general, the governments did not take their hands off the free market. Rather they have been eager to regulate the running of the free market—which is the case in many neoliberalization process. It was through these governments that the civil societal Islam increased its already acquired share in the new accumulation regime. But a total transfer of capital from the established capital circles to the newly emerging Muslim-conservative or Islamic capital circles would be systematically pursued under the AKP rule.

RQ: In Silent Violence you refer to a process of neoliberal authoritarianism that

is dominating the social and political sphere in Turkey in the form of Erdoganization? Last month, Erdogan won presidential election with about 52 percent of the vote. How do you explain Erdogan’s continued appeal?

SC: First of all, I should underline that Erdoğan’s authoritarianism should not be considered as a hindrance for his popularity among the majority of the voters in Turkey. Second, I should also underline that in 1982 when the populace was offered the plebiscitarian option to vote for the coup Constitution simultaneously electing the coup leader (Kenan Evren) as the President of the Republic, and enjoying civilian regime on the one hand, or saying no to the constitution and the presidency of General Evren, and thus saying no to the transition to civilian regime, the Constitution was approved with 91.4 votes. Third, Erdoğan’s victory in the presidential elections should be read with a view to multiple factors, starting with the personalistic style of politics that fits well to the dominant political culture in Turkey and to the neoliberal regimes, continuing with the deep rooted Turkish nationalistic sensitivities at the party and median voter level, and finally emphasizing the rather inefficient working of the main opposition party and leftist opposition at large. As explored in Galip Yalman’s contribution to Silent Violence, although personalistic politics has not been foreign to Turkey’s neoliberal times since the 1980s, it reached its climax with the AKP. This is due to the restructuring of the ruling mechanism, making it to fall almost under total authority of the

executive: the executive under the AKP rule has overtly been identified with Erdoğan's personal rule. The last presidential election in Turkey was the second in Turkey's history. Except for the 1982 plebiscite under military regime, in Turkey the election of the presidents were subjected to different regulations; they were elected by the parliament. But as in other cases, in this case too, by rapidly realized legal amendments—again by making the populace approve the related amendments through plebiscite in 2010 and similar to the coup tactic by forcing two options, either approve the change, and thus approve the preparation of a new (civilian) constitution that would replace the 1982 Constitution or stop asking for a new constitution—the presidential election method was changed. It was no surprise that with ample resources at hand for presidential campaign, built on strong religious-nationalistic motifs, on unity, and on the personal attributes of Erdoğan, the incumbent prime minister marked a victory in the presidential elections. The result was not surprising also for the reason that the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (RPP) continued to play in the hegemonic discourse from the very start of the presidential campaign—with overemphasis on Sunni Islam, starting with the identity of its presidential candidate, continuing with an increasing moralistic tone in its campaign rhetoric. This has certainly alienated the party's core electorate leading to no shows at the polls, while blocking the possibility for non-RPP voters to ally with the party. The last candidate, Selahattin Demirtaş, co-president of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP),

on the other hand offered a democratic portrait gaining the hearts and minds of the majority of the non-Kurdish democrats in Turkey; the votes that he got all over the country were promising, but always vulnerable in the face of the nationalistic sensitivities among the general populace.

As I noted in my answer to your previous question, Turkey's politics in the post-1980 era was characterized with centrist priorities, and the centrist voter is supposed to be mildly nationalist, mildly conservative, mildly religious, having no problem with authoritarianism. Well, that was the case for the late 1980s and the 1990s; as for the 2000s, when the AKP's rule is considered to be the first instance of stable governments since the late 1980s, this mild nature of nationalism, conservatism, and religiosity might evolve into either a silence-cum-approval or total allegiance to ever increasing authoritarianism. As a last word, I should also emphasize that the perception that AKP's rule has so far ensured stability in the country is directly related to the way AKP's social policies has so far been advertised and received by the majority of the populace. The party was tactful in dissolving the basis for claims to social rights while reforming previous public services system. In so doing, it was keen on bringing in charity discourse as a strategy and charity networks as a means to fill in the gaps that emerged out of the loss of social rights. This state of affairs, might also serve as a clue for understanding the AKP's and Erdoğan's persistent victory at the polls.

RQ: Finally, has Gezi Resistance opened paths for alternative political activism? What are the new or emerging fields of resistance after the Gezi?

SC: It is certain that Gezi Resistance was an inspiring case in the face of the TINA argument that has long been adopted and forced by different neoliberal governments, and increasing conservatism and authoritarianism that could be pursued depending on this argument. It was promising for it signified the spontaneously formed solidarity among diverse social and political forces with a claim to the public. It is worth exploring and sustaining for it represented one of the rare cases in the political history of Turkey where different voices of opposition against various facets of exploitation—class, ethnic, religious, and gender—could come and act together. It was all the more worth participating and reinforcing since it was perhaps the first instance that revealed the patchwork style of neoliberal politics, dividing structural problems into separate and almost isolated issue areas, thus dividing and neutralizing structural opposition. And it is worth sustaining the activism that emerged in the Gezi Park for it could extend throughout the country with perhaps the only shared attribute: nonviolence in a violence-torn political culture.

However, I am not certain that I could offer a relatively optimistic reading of what is there after the Gezi. For, despite the positive and promising sides that I noted above, in the thick of the Resistance we could hear – certainly with the understandable fear of

violence of the police force—calls for resorting to traditional style of opposition in the already existing political parties and/or establishing new ones... Today the most manifest continuity in the line of Resistance can be observed in the neighborhood gatherings/assemblies, which actually exemplify citizens' involvement in everyday politics. As an important asset that can be driven from the Gezi days, neighborhood collectives still function. Another instance of hope can be observed in the changing discourse among some of the parties of the left as exemplified in the PDP's discourse during Demirtaş's presidential campaign.

In a nutshell, the Gezi offered a venue and displayed the possibilities for citizens' activism to claim the public and to generate alternative publics. I think the ever-increasing dose of police violence through the Resistance was mostly due to the fear among the ruling elite for not knowing how to respond to this non-violent and never-violent claim. Likewise, both the Resistance and its aftermath once more confirmed the insufficiency of the established political parties to meet the new style of politics, promised in the unfolding of the Resistance.