



Charity, donations and Turkish politics

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Autorin: Lale Yalçın-Heckmann

The re-run of the Istanbul mayoral election on 23 June 2019 drew much attention in Turkey and in the international news. Some have assessed the re-election of the oppositional candidate Imamoğlu as evidence of Turkish democracy's maturity (the position of the ruling Justice and Development Party, AKP); others see the defeat of the AKP candidate Yıldırım as a sign of President Erdoğan's weakness and the failure of his authoritarian rule (AKP-critical voices).

The following day, 24 June, was also momentous, although it did not get as much attention as the election re-run: it marked the first hearing of Turkish businessman and philanthropist Osman Kavala, who had been detained since November 2017 on charges of being the organiser and financier of the 2013 Gezi protests. Together with 15 other charged persons, mostly academics, professionals, human rights activists, and intellectuals, Kavala was heard in court after having been kept in a single cell for more than 600 days in pre-trial detention before he could start defending himself (the indictment itself was not prepared until February 2019). The charges are extremely severe; Kavala's alleged role in the Gezi protests is presented as linked with an intent to "overthrow the government", which he vehemently denies. He faces a possible life sentence.[1] The optimism after the results of Istanbul's elections gives one some hope that this unjustified long detention of Kavala will come to an end soon and the accusations without legally convincing grounds will be laid to rest – even if the interim court decision (as of 25 June 2019) has been to continue his detention but to release another detained civil rights defender Yiğit Aksakoğlu who faces similar charges. The next hearing is scheduled for 18-19 July.

The Gezi protests started in 2013 as a protest by a handful of ecological activists against the government plans for cutting the trees in Taksim Gezi Park in Istanbul in order to build a replica of the 19th century Ottoman Artillery Barracks. It grew to be a major urban protest involving hundred thousands of people across the country, with supporting demonstrations in all cities of Turkey. According to anthropologists and social scientists of Turkey, these protests were not just directed against the neoliberal urban politics, but also against the intervention of

religious-conservative policies in general and against the AKP's policies and rule in particular (e.g. Özkırımlı 2014). Although there have already been previous trials of the spokespersons of this protest (e.g. Gezi Platform) which ended in acquittals, the prosecutor's text for accusing Kavala and others shows many similarities to the original Gezi trials. Many observers and commentators (including some AKP members of parliament) agree that the over-650-pages indictment text contains no convincing evidence at all to support the charges.

The legal aspects and the thinness of evidence are a matter for legal experts; in this blog post I would like to dwell on a different puzzle of anthropological character. Among the charged persons is Mücella Yapıcı, an architect and member of Gezi Platform. During her hearing on 24 June she protested against her renewed trial and rejected the accusation that she has been financing the Gezi protests: with her modest salary she could not even buy any food and buns to feed the protestors. She wished she had done as much as her elderly female neighbour Ayşe Teyze, who had cooked and distributed stuffed grape leaves (*dolma*) among the protestors, she is reported saying.[2] Indeed the Gezi protests created a remarkable space for spontaneous and widespread solidarity of all kinds, for individuals and groups from different political views and walks of life. I visited the protest ground in Taksim during that June 2013 together with other German academics when attending a meeting in Istanbul. We were all stunned at the variety of groups and the conviviality among the participants, sitting, talking with one another, holding public discussions, but also organising cleaning, setting up facilities, and presenting exhibitions, music, and art. One of my colleagues from the German delegation has reported in his university newspaper about his impressions from this brief visit among the Gezi protestors (see Laut 2013).

Even if the state's search for a secretly financed and organised group behind such a broad urban movement such as Gezi protests despite the lack of any trace of evidence sounds like a fantasy story, we can still pose the following question: how can certain kinds of sharing and support in political events so easily come to be associated with "violent opposition", as the indictment text seems to suggest? What is the fine line between morally legitimate gift-giving and a militant subversive act, from the point of view of the political power holders?

Donation and charity giving activities in Turkey are legally recognized, numerous, and spread across all levels of society. Many charities and foundations (*vakıf*) as well as associations (*dernek*) help and assist people with limited or no financial resources. Such organisations address people's religiously oriented giving (*sadaka/hayır*) as well as civic types of financial gifts (*bağış*). During the religious month of Ramadan pious Muslims are motivated and asked to donate and perform their religious duty of alms giving (*zekat*) by donating to various charity organisations, who then pass on the collected donations to the needy. In my field site in Isparta during Ramadan believers were called to donate as much as they could afford to a

general fund which then financed the daily fast-breaking dinner (*iftar*) for those who needed free food and/or wanted to share this food at the collective kitchens set up in tents in the city's major plaza. When I went by to see the kitchen and free *iftar* food being distributed, I was surprised by the long queue of people waiting for the food and communal fast-breaking. There were many students but also Syrian refugees among those waiting for food. It did not have the atmosphere one would find in communal fast-breaking events in smaller neighbourhood-like settings. The length of the queue hinted at both the number of those who perhaps needed this food, and at the number of donors who must have financed the kitchen and food.



Iftar tent at city center, Isparta, Mai 2019. (Foto: Lale Yalçın-Heckmann)

In spite of these deep roots in tradition and religion, donations and charity giving have nevertheless been politicized in Turkey. To which organisation one donates during Ramadan, for instance, could sometimes be interpreted as signalling political views: Those who donate to mosque-led activities and groups are often understood as being particularly pious and possibly supporting pro-Islamic politics. Persons with secularist world views may also donate during Ramadan but the chosen organisations might be charities which support girls' education or schools, or military foundations like the foundation of the fallen soldiers (*Mehmetçik Vakfı*). Even the Turkish Aeronautical Association (*Türk Hava Kurumu*) has been traditionally associated with "secular" donors. At the height of religious alms-giving during Ramadan, at the end of it (*Şeker Bayramı*), and before the Hajj festivities (*Kurban Bayramı*), such organisations fill much public space with their advertisements, trying to convince the donors to channel their financial gifts to their organisation.

Another kind of donation, which may also be either religiously or civically motivated, consists of the donations of business people. In Isparta the business-owning families within the rose oil industry whom I have been studying since 2014 have been prominent within the business community as donors to schools especially. Such donations strengthen the standing of the individual person and possibly also the family in the city as well as signalling their fulfilment of religious duties. I observed that almost all established family firms had at the very least sponsored a school, where one could read the name of the family firm's founding member and sometimes also female member of the family.

Such donations, however, can become risky when there is a political turn, as it has happened after the government turned against the Gülen movement starting in 2013. This movement is a transnational organization and network inspired by the Muslim preacher Fethullah Gülen living in exile in the USA and has been involved in promoting civic society institutions, such as schools and community organizations, although without much transparency. Although the Gülen movement's political and financial actions were on the whole tolerated and even supported by the ruling AKP for many years (see Hendrick 2013), in 2013 the movement fell out with President Erdoğan when Gülen-supporting prosecutors started accusing the AKP and Erdoğan's family members of corruption.^[3] The government reacted with a crackdown on the movement. The movement was associated with the armed coup attempt in Turkey in July 2016 in which over 200 people were killed and the military members of the movement as well as thousands of other supporters were charged and tried for being members of a terror organization and received long sentences. Isparta is said to have been one of the major cities where Gülen movement had been active, with supporters among the university personnel and business circles. Many among them were taken to court (before the attempted coup in July 2016) and received long sentences. The schools which had been associated with the Gülen movement and financed by local and other businessmen have been closed, and the assets of these businessmen confiscated. The trials of people accused of being Gülen supporters continue, and the evidence for charges and sentences often (if not always) remains obscure. Being charged with engaging in anti-government activity through making financial donations seems to have become even more politicised and open to volatile interpretations under the current government.

I would like to come back to the initial question I have raised: are civic and religious donations and gift-giving essentially based on different moral and political judgements? They may be, but if these donations are open to persecution depending on the changing political alliances in the country, they may become another means of politically dividing the population. If sharing food and resources during a political protest or donating to certain social and political projects can so easily become the target and grounds for legal punitive action, it would then mean that not only Kavala but also other Turkish businessmen are being pressured to support only those political and social projects which are "politically legitimised" by the ruling party.

Loyalty to a specific politician and political leader in financial gift-giving can very easily lead to an erosion of transparency as well as encroachment upon and criminalisation of civic or religious donations; the political message is worrying and hardly conducive to the individual and business investments which the government is trying to encourage in order to overcome Turkey's economic difficulties.

References:

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[1] See Reuters (24 June 2019) at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-gezi/turkish-court-remands-businessman-kavala-in-jail-lawyer-idUSKCN1TQ2GC>.

[2] See reports in online news report Bianet, published on 24 June 2019: <https://bianet.org/bianet/insan-haklari/209690-iddianamedeki-tek-dogru-sayfa-numaralari> (Turkish)

<http://bianet.org/english/human-rights/209688-osman-kavala-and-yigit-aksakoglu-appear-before-the-judge-after-months> (English), accessed on 27 June 2019.

[3] Such Gülen supporting inspectors and prosecutors had also prepared the charges against the Gezi protestors in the first instance. The irony is that the indictment text against Kavala and others borrow from this original one.