



Why the Voice of the ‘Poor Underdog’ is so Alarming

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On 28th March 2020, a young man calling himself Kolombo Malik who had only around hundred followers shared a video of himself on TikTok criticizing government appeals to the population to stay at home amid the COVID-19 outbreak.ⁱ Sitting in the driver's seat of a lorry, with arabesque music playing in the background, he said: "You tell us 'Stay at home Turkey.' How do we stay at home? I am not a pensioner, I am neither a civil servant nor rich. I am a worker. I am a truck driver. I have no bread, if I don't work. I can't pay my electricity, water, and rent. Not paying these is worse than dying. ... Either we die of hunger at home or of the virus. This virus won't kill me, but this system of yours will."

The next day, Kolombo Malik aka Malik Yılmaz was taken into custody by 10 police officers in his hometown Hatay province and accused of "incitement to disobey the law." Following the intervention of the head of the Hatay Bar Association, Malik Yılmaz's situation was made public on social media and his TikTok post went viral. Thousands of Twitter users showed solidarity by sharing his post and criticizing the authorities for detaining a hapless underdog (*gariban*) for voicing the facts. They juxtaposed Yılmaz's case with that of the son of an AKP deputy, who had posted photos of COVID-19 tests in his possession when these are not supposed to be disseminated outside hospitals.ⁱⁱ These cases highlighted the political bias on which lives may depend, and how the law in Turkey is increasingly personalised. Yılmaz was released on probation late the same day. After his release, he told the reporters: "In my testimony, I told them that we too want the poor to stay at home, and why this was not in practice possible."ⁱⁱⁱ

On the same day that Yılmaz was detained, Minister of the Interior Süleyman Soylu appeared in the YouTube programme of Cüneyt Özdemir. Formerly a prime-time news reporter in mainstream media, due to political pressures and censorship Özdemir is nowadays a freelance journalist. When he asked about the detainment of Yılmaz, the Minister answered with reference to those social media users who had defended him: "I will see if he is a poor

underdog (*gariban*) or whether he has an ulterior motive. I *personally* (my emphasis) do not think that it makes sense to share something online that provokes our people ... those practising patience and cooperation in their homes."^{iv}

The day after his release, Malik Yılmaz learned that he had lost his job. A few days later, he posted another video on his TikTok account explaining that, although he had made many applications, he was unable to find a new job and was willing to take anything to feed his family.^v A couple of weeks later, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the leader of opposition party CHP (Republican People's Party), instructed Hatay Municipality (run by the CHP) to hire Malik Yılmaz.^{vi} The legal case opened against him is still pending.

According to the official Twitter account of the Ministry of Interior on 21st May 2020, in the first 65 days of the pandemic the ministry investigated 10,111 Twitter accounts for 'spreading provocative information' about the pandemic. Altogether, 510 persons were taken into custody and charged. Why did Malik Yılmaz's case go viral and attract the attention of the Minister of Interior?

Perhaps a clue lies in the labeling of Malik Yılmaz as a poor underdog, *gariban*, first by the social media users to defend him and then by the Minister to target him. *Gariban* is a colloquial expression for subaltern. It denotes a person who has been stripped of his/her economic power and political agency. However, unlike what is expected of a *gariban*, Yılmaz has shown the courage to speak up and claim his constitutional rights to work and to life and health as a citizen.^{vii} The assertive subaltern is perceived as disloyal by the authoritarian neoliberal state and those who align themselves with it for their class interest. For them, Malik Yılmaz was no longer a hapless *gariban* but a threat. That is why he became a political target and an outcast no one was willing to employ.

Another reaction to precarity and COVID-19 is to give up on life and hope. Ahmet Karakeçi committed suicide on 15th April due to economic hardship. He left a note saying: "The corona virus did not kill me but helplessness and hopelessness did."^{viii}

Malik Yılmaz and Ahmet Karakeçi are not unique cases. The employment statistics for April 2020 showed that the number of persons of working age without a job and not actively looking for one had risen by 757,000 on the previous April. When one includes those who are unemployed but not officially registered,^{ix} the actual unemployment rate doubles to 28.7%.^x Ten representatives of the Turkish Statistical Institute were removed from their positions with a sudden decision in early June 2020. Statistics can be manipulated and ignored, but it is not so easy to ignore the voices of real people. The possibility that the courage of Malik Yılmaz might prove contagious must be alarming for the class politics of the state. That is why Yılmaz was 'honoured' by the Minister himself, shamelessly criminalizing free speech.

Reference

Engin Turhan. 2020. "Salgın Dönemlerinde Ortaya Çıkabilecek Ceza Sorumlulukları - Korona Tecrübesi," *Suç ve Ceza*. Vol 13 (1).

Notes

ⁱ <https://www.tiktok.com/@kolombomalik/video/6807676548225699077>

ⁱⁱ <https://twitter.com/avrasyaanket/status>

/1243846043504128000?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E12437Ctwgr%5E&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.tr724.com%2Fakpli-milletvekilinin-oglu-korona-testi-icin-on-siparis-topladi%2F

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://bianet.org/english/labor/222198-briefly-detained-for-stay-home-video-truck-driver-yilmaz-i-think-i-lose-my-job-too-> See also Turhan (2020), where it is argued that voicing opinion about the pandemic cannot be subject to criminal law, unless it actively prevents access to health or intentionally spreads fake news that directly cause harm to others

^{iv} https://twitter.com/sputnik_TR/status

/1244340942632636421?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1244ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Ftr.sputniknews.com%2Fturkiye%2F202003291041712021-beni-bu-duzeniniz-oldurur-diyen-tir-soforu-adli-kontrol-sartiyla-serbest-birakildi%2F

^v <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/video/tir-soforu-malik-yilmaz-o-gunden-beri-issizim-1744859>

^{vi} <https://www.birgun.net/haber/tir-soforu-yilmaz-icin-kilicdaroglu-ndan-talimat-304636>

^{vii} <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/yazarlar/2020/03/30/gariban-konusabilir-mi-ya-da-sahsi-hukuk/>

^{viii} <https://dokuz8haber.net/toplum-yasam/intihar-eden-yurttas-beni-virus-degil-caresizlik-oldurdu/>. Throughout 2019, suicides due to poverty have shocked the Turkish public.

^{ix} Not included in the officially unemployed category are those who have reached the age of employment but are not actively looking for a job, those who are not actively looking for a job but stated they can start a job in 2 weeks, those who have worked less than 40 hours a week at the time of survey but are willing to work full time in a stable job and those who work in seasonal agriculture.

^x See here: https://twitter.com/disk_arastirma/status/1281505856635502593/photo/1