DEMOCRATIC ORDER AND ETHNIC MINORITY RIGHTS: THE WEAKNESSES OF THE FINNISH AND TURKISH DEMOCRACIES

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Abstract:

This paper raises important questions about the nature of governance in Finland with a view to the difficulties of the Sámi minority, and in the same time in this study we present our comparative approach to investigate how Finland and Turkey are able to solve internal ethnic conflicts related to their national minorities. The article provides a comparative analysis of the democratic order in a consolidated democracy (Finland) and in a weak democracy (Turkey). The democratic experience of these countries is of reasonable importance, as a considerable number of countries worldwide are at various stages during the democratic experiment. This study outlines the role of democratic order in conflict prevention in these two states.

Rezumat:

Această lucrare ridică întrebări importante cu privire la natura guvernării din Finlanda raportată la problemele cu care se confruntă minoritatea Sami. În același timp, acest studiu prezintă o analiză comparativă cu scopul de a investiga modul în care Finlanda și Turcia sunt în măsură să rezolve conflictele etnice interne legate de minoritățile naționale. Articolul descrie procesele prin care Finlanda și Turcia, la fel ca mai multe state din Europa de Est, iau măsuri în vederea consolidării unei ordini democratice care să funcționeze adecvat. În contextul în care într-un număr considerabil de țări din întreaga lume se desfășoară un experiment democratic, experiența democratică a acestor țări prezintă o complexitate apreciabilă. Acest

studiu subliniază rolul ordinii democratice în prevenirea conflictelor din aceste două state.

Keywords: democratic governance, Finland, Sámi politicians, Turkey, Kurd minority

The paper argues that although Finland and Turkey are countries with an extensive and effective civil society, functioning democratic institutions and free press, the failure is that these democratic institutions have not been fully extended to the Sámi population and have not yet been spread to the Kurds. We show that not fully developed democratic governance may not be adequate to manage intricate aspects of internal security problems.

This paper shows that both the Finnish and the Turkish democracies have their own weaknesses which derive from the fact that the current minority populations (Sámi and Kurdish) have not trusted this democracy. Accordingly, democracy seems to be a difficult matter for these minorities, though it represents the basis of a Western-style society. Democracy is an important concern for the Kurds and Sámi, but in both countries included in the study actions are needed so that the values of these two populations are appreciated. Moreover, justice should be sought through the democratic process.

The Sámediggi and the transition to democracy

Jouni Kitti, a former Sámi politician notes that issues related to democracy can be addressed to the *Sámediggi* (Sámi Parliament), where some of the members' hostile attitudes towards the world around are derived from their predecessors' language use and way of doing politics.¹ Members of the *Sámediggi* often act inefficiently with regard to the ideals of democracy and freedom and do not seem to try to build a common understanding on the basis of generally accepted objectives. Although the founding of the *Sámediggi* had been considered a success, the direct transition to democracy seemed only a dream as long as the new institutions did not prove to be effective. Sámi politicians became the

¹ Jouni Kitti, "Saamelaiset arvot hukassa, hukan arvot niiden tilalla", <http://jounikitti.fi/suomi/politiikka/arvothukassa.html>, accessed at 18.10.2016

misrepresentations of democracy by losing the understanding of the balance among various groups of populations. Sámi politicians had ambitious and long-term objectives but divergent for the Sámi population. Building democracy on non-existent funds proved to be ineffective. Practice soon showed that the land ownership issues of the Northern Sámi people were considered a priority while for other groups of Sámi they were inessential. As long as the objectives of the *Sámediggi* are not achieved, the confidence of the rest of the population will not be restored.

The current form of democracy in Finland has only taken into consideration the interests of the majority population, not considering also the will of the Sámi. The proper approach should take into account their realities as well. Practice shows that the issues related to the Sámi are not prioritized among the Sámi politicians. The Sámi politician Kitti J. stresses that the Sámi people should find the ground themselves for prioritization or otherwise this will be done according to the Sámi politicians' principles. On the other hand, Sámi politicians are expected to show more engagement in matters related to the Sámi.

Sirpa Pietikäinen, a member of the European Parliament, argues that the European Union does not give enough thought to the Sámi issues and that their affairs should be monitored. Finland had received admonitions related to the Sámi human rights issues several times but according to the researcher Leena Heinämäki, Finland did not make any progress.² Although the Constitution of Finland respects the international law and efforts are made at times, the problem is that many politicians think the current achievements are enough and that there are also certain difficulties in interpreting the legislation. Sámi politicians consider that they do not have the adequate conditions for work and that the Sámi are overlooked when it comes to jurisdiction, therefore the agenda is full of matters to be negotiated and handled.

The authorities have the obligation to promote services in the Sámi language but there are several language problems especially in the health services. Doctors in Sápmi encounter language problems almost on a daily basis as the speakers of the Sámi language are not enough at the moment. In Finland, for example, mental health services should be better assisted,

² "EU:ssa enemmän huomiota saamelaisille", <http://www.eurooppatiedotus.fi/Public/default.aspx?contentid=352722&contentlan=1&culture=fi-FI>, accessed at 20.10.2016

while in the other Scandinavian countries other services lack attention. Problems caused by language issues also exist at the town halls in *Sápmi* where it is difficult to find qualified employees. The state would be expected to offer enough separate funding to these institutions, otherwise the health care and social care reforms may not clarify the situation.

Concerning language learning among young people who want to learn the Sámi language, the state should create the best possible conditions. Researching the Sámi communities' past and the acknowledgement of their history are also important steps.

Some Sámi intellectuals think that the Finnish government has a dismissive attitude towards the Sámi people and their rights. Young people in these communities also feel discouraged and resentful. It seems that the existing means of democracy have not helped the Sámi expand their rights. Moreover, Finland has raised the question whether the Sámi are indigenous people or a nation at all.³ The Sámi artists and intellectuals present their attitudes of criticism towards Finland's Sámi policy. They even accuse the state of colonialism. They emphasize that the Sámi population should be able to pursue their goals, practice their basic rights and follow their traditional way of life without the Finnish state interfering with laws and regulations. Lehtola (1997) is of the opinion that the young Sámi generation's feedback is reasonable considering the developments of the last decade and the change of mentality in the country.⁴ The Sámi people experience disdain and social stigma from the majority culture, just as immigrants face racism.

Poelzer and Wilson (2014) highlight that although the authority from the national government in Finland has been transferred to the local government, the latter struggles with restricted administrative potentiality and constant social challenges, and additionally the local government does not share common objectives and concerns with the national government.⁵ The regional government in *Sápmi* exercises a more restricted autonomy

³ "Taiteilijaryhmä Suohpanterror: Kannustamme saamelaisia kansalaistottelemattomuuteen", <http://www.aamulehti.fi/kotimaa/taiteilijaryhma-suohpanterror-kannustamme-saamelaisia-kansalaistottelemattomuuteen/>, accessed at 3.10.2016

⁴ Lehtola Veli-Pekka, *Saamelaiset. Historia, yhteiskunta, taide* (Jyväskylä: Gummerus Kirjapaino, 1997)

⁵ Greg Poelzer, Gary N. Wilson, "Governance in the Arctic: Political Systems and Geopolitics", in *Arctic Human Development Report: Regional Processes and Global Linkages*, ed. J. N. Larsen, G. Fondahl (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 2014), 185-222

because its policy proposals are not legally binding. Strengthening balance, promoting dialogue and actual cooperation should be aimed at in the relation of these two institutions and among municipalities.

Josefsen (2010) also underlines that in practice the Finnish authorities do not consult with the *Sámediggi* regarding the conclusions that may influence the Sámi population's position.⁶ Political action is not ensured at all because of the fact that most of the politicians and the central government have restricted knowledge about the legal framework that regulates the rights of these indigenous people.

Unstable democracy declining in Turkey

With a view to the nation building and governance, it seems that the 'one country, one nation, one language' motto continues to affect Turkey in present times. At the time of the attempted coup on the 15th of July 2016 a discussion evolved in Turkey about concepts of democratic rights, pacifist methods of governance, civil society and dialogue.

As Asgharzadeh (2007) emphasizes, only the Kurds' right to self-expression, self-governance and self-rule would assure the possibility of fairly and clearly interpreting the notion of democracy.⁷ The exertion of the Kurds' voice and language is a prerequisite in confronting dictatorship. The Kurdish language would allow its speakers to reveal and depict their own past and actuality. The Kurdish people cannot achieve worthwhile advancement and prosperity assuming that their language, culture, traditions and values are not in a harmonic connection with their surroundings.

The Turkish government promotes its own program in the middle of the disturbance instead of trying to diminish ethnic and social demarcation. In fact it sustains more separation and animosity by not getting through to the representatives of the Kurdish minority of the country. Rather than aiding them to renew from the traumas of the past year, the government allows ethnic hostility to rise. While Turkey is struggling against the possible hazards to the country, its unstable democracy, the social and human rights are constantly declining.

⁶ Eva Josefsen, *The Saami and the National Parliaments: Channels for Political Influence* (Mexico: IPU, UNDP, 2010)

⁷ Alireza Asgharzadeh, *Iran and the Challenge of Diversity. Islamic Fundamentalism, Aryanist Racism, and Democratic Struggles* (New York, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007)

The Kurdish people will endure more because the government does not seem to understand that not the Kurdish nation is the great threat to the country but the growing separation and alienation among the various social groups. The Turkish government should admit that a united nation is more able to confront diverse threats than a divided country and should act correspondingly.

In conclusion, for the sake of truth it should be noted that almost 100 years have passed since the introduction of Atatürk's reforms, but a significant part of the Turkish society is still untouched by the spirit of these reforms, and among the population still prevails the intolerant perception of Islam which was almost unknown in the Ottoman Empire.

After the failed coup attempt on the 15th of July 2016 the President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, repeatedly confirmed that Turkey was working on preserving the democratic order, protecting human rights and the unity of the state. Albeit the Kurdish problem has been discussed in Europe, the Turkish Prime Minister denied any possibility of finding a solution saying that there was no solution regarding the Kurdish problem.⁸ The journalists supporting the Kurdish policy have been arrested.

Turkey needs encouragement and pressure has to be applied on the government to adopt reforms that lead the country towards a more democratic direction but the inner will is absent. The attempted coup could have been a chance for a new beginning, but it seems the Kurdish population of Turkey cannot witness any positive changes. The Kurdish people's hope for a real democracy disappeared and they soon experienced the harsh reality that the government had done nothing to make progress towards a true democracy. In fact, Turkey is moving towards a fascist dictatorship, a presidential dictatorship that is characterized by extreme authoritarianism and political views that prioritize national values.

Turkey needs the immediate restoration of stability and peace, but this process should take place within the boundaries of rule of law and democratic norms. At the present moment, it seems to be impossible to have a proper democracy in that country. Therefore, after the coup attempt the perception and the public image about Turkey have significantly

⁸ Nuray Mert, "Turkey is missing another chance to change", <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-is-missing-another-chance-to-change-.aspx?pageID=449&nID=103562&NewsCatID=406>, accessed at 11.10.2016

changed in Europe. Moreover, the operations against the Kurdish press suggest that the fight against terrorism is not presently effective.

As Hassanpour (1992) argues, changes in the Kurdish society cannot occur if the political rule is not democratized in Turkey and the state power is not decentralized, which would mean an important linguistic impact as well.⁹ In the case of Kurds, the political unification does not seem possible at the moment, so they are not given the chance for a linguistic unification either and they are likely to experience further limitations in exercising their language and dissemination rights. Definitely, parallel democratization processes in the surrounding countries seem very improbable, as currently Turkey is conducting a war in Syria and prevents the Syrian Kurdish ambitions from creating an independent state along the Turkish borders. According to the current situation the USA and Russia oppose the Kurdish autonomy in Syria as they want Syria to remain united. Although Russia has emphasized that the Kurds should be fully involved in the political process, in Syria the situation has turned again out to be greatly to the Kurds' detriment. Turkey's cross-border interference to clear the border area has changed the world's assessment about the region. According to the Turkish President no procedure can be implemented in Syria without Turkey's approval, as the country protects its borders.¹⁰

As Gunter (2008) also emphasized, the Turkish President, Erdoğan, admitted that the state had made many errors in the past and the clarification of the Kurdish problem needed a more democratic policy.¹¹ Regrettably, these former authoritative governmental affirmations have recently been denied by Erdoğan.

At the present moment, Turkey does not serve as an example of democratic reform in the Middle East and conflict resolution activities are not the priority of the state. Earlier endeavors of building democracy and activities of building rule of law proved to be failures. Blanchard et al. (2008) point out that because of the current level of disturbance in Turkey

⁹ Amir Hassanpour, *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan 1918–1985* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992)

¹⁰ "No Syria plan without Turkish consent possible after Jarablus operation: Erdoğan", <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/no-syria-plan-without-turkish-consent-possible-after-jarablus-operation-erdogan-.aspx?pageID=238&nID=103730&NewsCatID=352>, accessed at 29.09.2016

¹¹ Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds Ascending. The Evolving Solution to the Kurdish Problem in Iraq and Turkey* (New York, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)

there is no hope for political reconciliation or reinforcing stability.¹² Democracy promotion and work seem unlikely in the prevailing turbulent situation.

Conclusions

The governments of the states included in this research should focus on the principles of democracy, justice, equality, respect for human rights and non-discrimination if they want to meet the most important preconditions of a democratic society. Finland and Turkey should admit that respect of the right to self-determination of the Sámi and Kurdish people is not an impediment but a progress in the democratic governance of the respective states (Åhrén 2016).¹³ Without a governance reform in Turkey which helps to protect the minorities' human rights, the state cannot bridge the gap between human rights principles and their exertion. Governance in Finland and Turkey would assume more liable and transparent political processes according to the Sámi and Kurdish minority representatives. The Sámi Parliament and the Finnish government are expected to rely on more dialogue in making decisions about their indigenous people, so that the *Sámediggi* would be considered more effective in protecting the Sámi language and culture along with education and health policies.

¹² Christopher M. Blanchard, Kenneth Katzman, Carol Migdalovitz, Alfred Prados, Jeremy M. Sharp, "Iraq: Regional Perspectives and U.S. Policy", in *Surging out of Iraq?*, ed. S. J. Costel (New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2008), 129-160

¹³ Mattias Åhrén, *Indigenous Peoples' Status in the International Legal System* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)

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