

BeeHive

Middle East Social Media

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Volume 2, Issue 11, December 2014

The Return of Ottoman Turkish and Erdoğan's Settling of Accounts with Fethullah Gülen

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In recent weeks, the government of Turkey has proven that Erdoğan's declaration last September¹ that the beginning of a "New Turkey," symbolized by Erdoğan's inauguration as president, was not merely an empty political slogan. With the assistance of his loyal ally Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, Erdoğan continues accumulate power and legitimacy to promote the measures that move him closer to achieving his vision. Of these, two acts particularly riled social network sites (SNS) during the last month: the return of the Ottoman Turkish language to the curricula of middle and high schools, and a campaign against media outlets identified with his political rival, the exiled cleric Fethullah Gülen.

In early December, the Turkish public was shocked to discover that, as part of the 19th Educational Conference, a significant annual event for the Turkish educational system, the Ministry of Education decided to make the Ottoman Turkish language a required part of the curriculum, in direct opposition to the policy of the Republic's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who was responsible for the replacement of Arabic script with the Latin alphabet for writing Turkish. The decision quickly became the hottest topic on SNS. As expected, proponents of Erdoğan fully supported the change, joining together under slogans like "The heritage of our Ottoman fathers becomes a required class," and "We want to read our fathers' gravestones."² Government officials echoed these sentiments. In his justification of the reform, Prime Minister

Davutoğlu claimed that gravestones inscribed in Ottoman Turkish are an invaluable part of the nation's heritage.³ Building on this last statement, Davutoğlu was greeted at a party meeting with signs in Ottoman Turkish declaring, "We love you, the invaluable Ahmet Davutoğlu." (Pictured)

Conversely, Kemalist users on SNS greeted this dramatic, anti-Kemalist decision with anger and claims that the move was designed to destroy the Latin alphabet reform instituted by Atatürk, and accused Erdoğan's ruling AKP party of returning Turkey to dark days.⁴ In order to ridicule the move and illustrate the irrelevance of the Ottoman Turkish language in the current day, users uploaded images including long, complex sentences in Ottoman Turkish, showing its Arabic and Farsi influences, and compared them to sentences in modern Turkish that are free of foreign influences and clearly comprehensible.



Kurdish users, led by the Kurdish HDP party, similarly denounced the decision. For years, Kurdish citizens have been waiting for their language to be recognized as an official language and for the right to learn it in school. They were horrified to learn that studying Ottoman Turkish would now be mandatory. The comments by Kurdish user focused, therefore, on the demand that the Kurdish language be included in the curriculum, both as subject in its own right, and as a legitimate language of instruction for the other subjects in the humanities and sciences.⁵ They also expressed strong opposition to studying the Ottoman language with the slogan: "We don't want to learn Ottoman; we want to learn Kurdish, Zaza, Laz, Circassian and Armenian."⁶ Acceding to heavy pressure, the Turkish Ministry of Education moderated its stance and ruled that Ottoman Turkish studies will become a mandatory subject only for religious schools, and be an elective in other schools.



An interesting response to the Ministry of Education's decision came from supporters of the religious leader Fethullah Gülen. Although one might assume that they would support the move because Gülen's spiritual father, cleric Said Nursi (1877-1960), opposed the alphabetic reform of Atatürk, their

response was complex. Although the left-wing newspaper BirGün does not support Gülen, his followers re-tweeted its front page when it carried a single-word headline in Ottoman Turkish, "Thief" ("Hırsız," pictured). This headline – which hints at the corruption scandals involving officials in the Erdoğan government that the Turkish police force, associated with the Fethullah Gülen, uncovered last year⁷ – illustrates the dual position of Gülen's supporters on this issue. On one hand, the language of the headline makes their connection to the Ottoman language clear;

on the other hand, the headline itself expressed strong criticism of Erdoğan, who is willing to use any means to divert the public discourse from the scandals, including reinstating the study of Ottoman Turkish.

The tension between supporters of Gülen and the government culminated on December 11, when a mysterious user with the pseudonym Fuat Avni (pictured above) – apparently a senior official in the Davutoğlu government who identifies with Gülen – leaked confidential information about the government’s plan to act against the newspaper Zaman and the television channel Samanyolu, both known for taking positions critical of the government and affiliated with Gülen. This warning soon proved accurate. On December 14, the police (from which supporters of Gülen were purged in the last year) raided the offices of media outlets in 13 districts across Turkey, and the private homes of their heads. During the operation, leading journalists and former police officials were detained. Opponents of Erdoğan on SNS presented the operation as a further step by the government to silence them. Their protest slogans included “You can’t silence the free media” and “I invite the police to arrest me, too.”⁸ The protests spread from the cyberspace to the street when an angry mob surrounded the headquarters of Zaman and demonstrated against the arrests. No unusual clashes between security forces and protesters were reported. Prime Minister Davutoğlu backed the campaign, stressing that anyone who dared to foment a “coup” against the Erdoğan government would pay the price. In this spirit, users identified with AKP used SNS to spread slogans like “Treason can’t be forgiven” and “It’s time for cleaning.”⁹

In short, the return of the Ottoman Turkish language to the educational system in Turkey is further proof of the intentions of Erdoğan and Davutoğlu to bequeath to future generations a collective consciousness and historical memory that celebrates the Ottoman past they consider a source of inspiration for Turkey’s future. This is accompanied by a foreign policy that many experts are already calling “Neo-Ottoman.” In this context, it is important to note that, similar to the Ottoman concept of government, under Erdoğan’s leadership, Turkey is becoming more centralized, and the level of tolerance for internal criticism is dwindling. To accomplish this end, the Turkish government repeatedly stresses the need to suppress the “deep state,” the formerly powerful factions largely associated with the military, whose informal systems never cease burrowing beneath its foundations. As a result, the pressure exerted by the Turkish government on state and private media outlets naturally leads to self-censorship. In this dynamic, the social media continues to be the main channel for subversive messages, and the only space where they cannot be silenced in traditional ways.

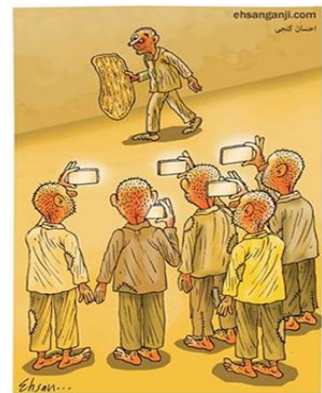
If There's No Bread, We'll Eat Biscuits: Responses to the increase of Bread Prices in Iran

Dr. Raz Zimmt

On December 1, the price of bread in Iran increased sharply, by approximately 30%. At a special press conference, government spokesman Mohammad Baqer Nobakht declared that the government had not initiated the price increase, but would permit the rise in order to compensate bakeries for the increase in production prices during the last year. He further noted that the higher price would lead to better quality, because the quality of bread had been declining due to Bakeries efforts to save on production costs.¹⁰



Predictably, the price increase was the subject of severe criticism on social networking sites (SNS). Many citizens used SNS to publicize the new prices, which were, in some districts, as much as 30% higher. Many users were outraged by the price hike for a basic consumer product, and augmented their criticism with complaints that, in recent years, average wages have risen by a substantially smaller percentage than the cost of living. For example, one user of the website Asr-i Iran noted that while his salary as a teacher had only increased six-fold since 2003, the price of chicken had skyrocketed to 20 times more than it was then.¹¹ Another user wrote that he is especially concerned for poor children who have no choice but to work from morning to evening, subsisting on bread alone. The price increase will now force them to divide their portion.¹² Other users complained that while the government refuses to cancel the stipends to citizens with high salaries, it increases the price of bread in a way that harms those earning low wages.¹³ A few responded to price hike sarcastically. For example, one user wrote that bread will soon become so expensive that people will begin uploading “selfies” of themselves when eating it.¹⁴ There were, conversely, some responses that agreed with the government’s position that it is necessary to compensate bakers for the increase in their production costs. One of them introduced himself as the son of a baker and said that the price of bread had not changed for several years while the cost of producing it had at least tripled, making it necessary to consider the bakers’ plight, too.¹⁵



The discourse on SNS regarding the price of bread quickly became a political debate between supporters of President Rouhani and his opponents. While some of the president’s supporters blamed his predecessor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, his opponents fiercely criticized Rouhani’s policies and accused him of breaking campaign promises to improve the economic situation.

After criticism of the president was published by a Facebook page identified with his political opponents, one user wrote that anyone who had supported Ahmadinejad had no right to complain about higher prices since the previous president was responsible for the economic crisis.¹⁶

Responses to the higher price of bread generally reflected the despair felt by many Iranians, including those who consider themselves former supporters of Rouhani. Many shared the disparaging comments echoing one of the most prevalent victory slogans on SNS after Rouhani won the elections last summer: “Thank you, Rouhani.” In some cases, users expressed their overall disappointment with the Islamic Revolution that had not kept its promise to improve the economic situation of Iranian citizens. One complained that the Revolution, which was supposedly an uprising of the oppressed, had only lead to increased poverty,¹⁷ and referenced one of the formative speeches of the Revolution given by Ayatollah Khomeini when he returned from exile in February 1979. In that speech, he promised to provide free electricity, water and transportation to the citizens of this country. Mockingly, one user tweeted: “Good morning. We’ll supply electricity, water and buses for free, so what if the price of bread went up by 30%?”¹⁸ On the margins of the public discourse there were a few responses, primarily from Iranian exiles, calling for more active protests. One of them criticized the Iranian public for not taking action to improve its situation, and noted that while Europeans protest price increases and drivers go on strike when the price of fuel is increased, Iranians lack the courage to do anything.¹⁹



The timing of the price increase – a few days after the failure of the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the West in Vienna, at which the deadline for concluding the negotiations was extended by seven months – led some SNS users to connect the two events. While the supporters of the government emphasized the importance of the nuclear agreement as a means for the removal of sanctions, which would improve the economic situation, the president’s opponents claim that the government both agreed to significant concessions regarding the nuclear program while failing in its efforts to improve the economic situation. Remembering Rouhani’s well-known declaration during the election campaign, “The centrifuges should spin, but the life of people and the economy should also move forward”, one user wrote mockingly, “The centrifuges stopped and citizens’ life has also stopped.”²⁰ A few users also criticized regime’s preference for the nuclear program over the welfare of its citizens, including one user on the Facebook page of BBC Persian language journalist Mehdi Parpanchi, who wrote, in jest, that Iranian citizens have no bread, but they do have 800 kg of uranium.²¹

To conclude, the responses on SNS to the steep increase in bread prices reveal the complex attitude of the Iranian public to the ongoing economic crisis. On one hand, the responses express a feeling of despair and an increasing gap between the public and the government that

has yet to keep its promises to provide a response to the economic distress of citizens. These feelings are likely to be further accentuated following the expected decline in the national revenues following the steep drop in oil prices and the lack of agreement between Iran and the West on nuclear issues, which could lead to removal of the sanctions. On the other hand, protests have not yet expanded beyond cyberspace and into the streets. Although Iranian citizens are expressing their frustration on SNS, it seems that they currently have no intention to protest actively in a way that might pose a political challenge to the regime.

Egypt in the Eye of the Storm: The Acquittal of Hosni Mubarak

Dr. Michael Barak

Ever since the removal of President Mohammed Morsi and the exclusion of Muslim Brotherhood activists from political, religious and public arena in Egypt, there has been an intensive public relations campaign on social networking sites (SNS) denigrating the regime of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Both Islamic activists from the Brotherhood and secular activists from the April 6 Youth Movement frequently demand the immediate ousting of the military regime, action to implement the goals of the January 2011 revolution, and carrying out the sentence of former president Hosni Mubarak, who has been imprisoned for the last three years after being convicted for the death of protesters during the revolution. On November 29, 2014, the discourse intensified greatly after an Egyptian court acquitted Mubarak, cleared him of all responsibility for the protesters' deaths, and ordered that he be released from prison.

The court's ruling prompted mixed reactions on SNS. Some secular users welcomed the decision and emphasized that Mubarak should be treated with generosity because of his contribution to the resilience of the Egypt during his 30 years in office.²² Several even claimed that he is owed an apology for the wrong that had been done to him.²³ Conversely, there was a strong feeling of disappointment and emotional turmoil in light of the court's decision. Many secular users recalled the memory of the demonstrators who were killed, and stressed that their blood remains abandoned following the decision of the court.²⁴ One noted sorrowfully, "The January revolution is dying: November 29 [2014] heralds the demise of the Egyptian judicial system." Another commented sarcastically that the Egyptian court had ordered the removal of martyrs from their graves, so they could be accused of suicide for the purpose of shaming Pres. Mubarak." Activists from the Brotherhood tweeted that as long as citizens who do not obey the regime are oppressed, the chances of another revolution increase.²⁵



The discourse on SNS also reveals the lack of faith in the institutions of the Egypt state, which are perceived as capitulating to will of the regime, thereby becoming partners in Sisi's discriminatory policy and shoring up his power. Both secular users and members of the Muslim Brotherhood described this as obsequiousness, and a betrayal of the Egyptian people and the January revolution. An Islamic activist tweeted that the judicial system serves as a "rod in hand of the regime;" while those close to the authorities are treated leniently, common citizens do not have access to a fair trial. Poet Ibrahim Abidi said disparagingly, "When Mubarak is released, the regime will arrest the people for falsehood."²⁶ It seems that many users see the institutions of the state as actors in a play whose finale was predetermined: the innocence of Mubarak.²⁷ Additional testimony to this feeling is a newly launched hashtag, "Acquittal feast for all."²⁸ Egyptian media outlets were also accused of hypocrisy by those who noted that they spoke out against Mubarak at the beginning of the revolution, but they changed their tune and praised him once his acquittal was announced.²⁹ Against this backdrop, videos, standup routines and songs mocking state institutions and their leaders were uploaded to the Internet, similar to this picture in which representatives of the media, business men, the judiciary, and military are shown as marionettes controlled by Sisi.³⁰

Online discourse also accuses Sisi of governing corruptly, and the Egyptian people of being blind to the regime's attempts to mislead it in numerous ways. For example, users discuss the government's attempt to bribe Mahmoud Badr founder of the secular opposition movement Tamarod by granting him a license to operate a biscuit factory on land expropriated for this purpose in Kaliobia province. The willingness of Badr to accept this proposal earned him the title "Betrayer of the revolution's principles." Singer Mouhamed Attia tweeted, "Mahmoud Badr is a clear example of someone who sold his soul to the authorities and abetted the murder of his generation's dream, for a most despicable price."³¹

On 5 December 2014, revelation of yet another scandal reinforced the suspicion and antipathy towards the regime when an alleged telephone conversation between Counsel General Mamdouh Shahin and Sisi's office manager, General Abbas Kamel, was leaked. In the conversation, the two were heard discussing the need to forge documents to facilitate the conviction of Mohammed Morsi when he stands trial for treason. The leaked conversation led to sharp criticism from secular users of SNS who emphasized that even those who do not support the Brotherhood are disgusted by this move, and added that the Muslim Brotherhood and the military are two sides to the same coin: both seek to establish a dictatorship while trampling the opponent. Activists in the Brotherhood claimed, on their part, that this is further proof that the regime is plotting against the Egyptian revolution and the Arab Spring, and wants to fortify its power.³² In this atmosphere, activists in the Brotherhood used SNS as a stage for calling on their supporters and other opponents of the regime to take to the streets, using hashtags like "The second revolution is renewed," "Sisi and Mubarak will fall," and "Together we will save Egypt."³³

Meanwhile, members of the Muslim Brotherhood in other countries attempted to use SNS to inflame the atmosphere against the Egyptian regime. Tareq al-Suwaidan, head of the Brotherhood in Kuwait, tweeted: “Is it conceivable that the legal system in Egypt today rules one day to execute more than 180 people for murdering thirteen military personnel without any evidence, but cannot find even a shred of evidence for the murder of thousands at hands Mubarak and his gang?” In response, users in Egypt and Syria declared that that al-Suwaidan should focus on affairs of the Gulf states and criticized his involvement in Iraq and Egypt.³⁴



In conclusion, the discourse on Egyptian SNS indicates increasing deterioration in the public’s trust of state institutions, especially legal system that, many participants in the discourse claim, is influenced by foreign interests. In other words, the acquittal of Mubarak is interpreted by many as a badge of shame for the legal system, and proof that that it is just another arm of a regime that has proven itself more interested in protecting its own power than promoting reforms. Nearly four years later, the January revolution is seen as a complete failure that has not yet led to any significant change. This perception might lead to the resumption of civil protests in Egypt, demanding genuine changes that will promote human rights and ensure freedom. One manifestation of this mood is the “Bring them to trial” PR campaign launched activists of the Tamarod 25-30 movement on December 11, 2014, demanding the resumption of Mubarak’s trial.³⁵ Against this background, the attempt³ by activists in Muslim Brotherhood to inspire the public to take to the streets for another revolution is evident, although it seems that, for the moment, they are unable to propel the public into the streets.

¹ See Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak, “Welcome to the ‘New Turkey,’” Beehive Vol 2 issue 8 September <http://bit.ly/1vZHpAJ>, last accessed, January 6, 2014.

² Ecdadın Mirası Osmanlıca Zorunlu Ders Oluyor

³ Mezar Taşları – Twitter

#OsmanlıcaZorunluDersOluyor

#HerkesOsmanlıcaÖğreniyor

⁴ Harf Devrimi

⁵ Kürtçe Osmanlıca

⁶ Osmanlıca değil Kürtçe, Zazaca, Lazca, Çerkesçe, Ermenice öğrenmek istiyoruz

⁷ See Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak, “Corruption, plots and shoe boxes: Struggles in Turkey,” Mida. January 8, 2014 <http://bit.ly/1wYajrJ> last accessed, January 6, 2014 [Hebrew].

⁸ More literally translated, “I turn myself in.” #FreeMediaCannotbeSilenced #kendimi ihbar ediyorum #ÖzgürBasınSusmaz

⁹ #VatanıhanetinÖzrüOlmaz #ZamanTemizlikZamanı

¹⁰ <http://www.dolat.ir/NSite/FullStory/News/?Serv=0&Id=255085>.

¹¹ <http://www.asiran.com/fa/news/368606> /افزایش-30-در-صدی-قیمت-نان-این-جو-د-شیب-ملايم

¹² <https://www.facebook.com/sigarchivoa/posts/10152652841753743>.

¹³ <http://www.asiran.com/fa/news/368606ملايم-اين-بود-شيب-ملايم>.

¹⁴

<https://www.facebook.com/mehdi.parpanchi/photos/a.302592706529711.68489.299496943505954/642789932509985/?type=1&theater>.

¹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/sigarchivoa/posts/10152652841753743>.

¹⁶

<https://www.facebook.com/peinevesht/photos/a.237255979802253.1073741828.237247356469782/319564984904685/?type=1&theater>.

¹⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/sigarchivoa/posts/10152652841753743>.

¹⁸ <https://twitter.com/mehran6524/status/539286971836006400>.

¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/sigarchivoa/posts/10152652841753743>.

²⁰ <http://alef.ir/vdca0wnuw49nmo1.k5k4.html?250970>.

²¹ <https://www.facebook.com/mehdi.parpanchi/photos/a.302592706529711.68489.299496943505954/642789932509985/?type=1&theater>.

²² <https://www.facebook.com/video.php?v=725276450927080>

²³ See for example the Facebook page, "I sorry." https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/أسف_ياريس

²⁴ #الحكم_بعد_المكالمة

²⁵ .29.11.14 <https://www.facebook.com/video.php?v=725276450927080> .#محاكمة_مبارك

²⁶ #براءة_مبارك

²⁷ .20.12.14 <https://twitter.com/GamalMohamedSia/status/546355541967400960> .#القضاء_الشامخ

²⁸ #مهرجان_البراءة_للجميع

²⁹ See also a video edited by an Egyptian youth: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpjOoMkYAIQ>

³⁰ See also the video, "We acquitted him and slapped the people."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPUaqAa3l0> .(8.12.14)

³¹ 17.12.14. #مصنع_البسكويت , <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=327621860761791> ,

<https://twitter.com/MouhamedAttia/status/545157372269068288>

³² #ممدوح_شاهين .#تسريب_مكتب_السياسي

³³ #ثورة_تاني_من_جديد , #يسقط_يسقط_سياسي_مبارك , #معا_ننقذ_مصر .

https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/يسقط_يسقط_حكم_العسكر . https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/معا_ننقذ_مصر

³⁴ December 2, 2014 <https://www.facebook.com/Dr.TareqAlSuwaidan/posts/10153259205976677>