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Turkish workers return to the public discourse

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May Day and the mine disaster that led to the deaths of 301 miners in the town of Soma on May 13 were the central topics of discussion on Turkish-language social networks (SNS) last month. Since the growth of leftist movements in Turkey in the 1960s, May Day has been a significant date on the calendar in Turkey, as it is in many countries. It is commemorated with marches, demonstrations, and ceremonies. In 1977, the day acquired additional importance after unknown assailants opened fire from the roofs of buildings near Taksim Square and killed 34 demonstrators. The event, dubbed “bloody May Day,” is etched deeply in the consciousness of the labor movement in Turkey, which now considers May Day even more important. However, since 1978 the Turkish government has not allowed May Day events to be held in Taksim Square.

Since coming to power, Prime Minister Erdoğan has sought to break political and cultural patterns that were previously untouchable. Examples include his proposals to promote a solution to the Kurdish conflict,¹ to lift the ban on head coverings in public places, and to grant permission for May Day events to be held in Taksim Square for the first time since 1978.² In 2010-2012, May Day festivities and ceremonies were indeed held there with the approval and support of the authorities. However, in 2013 when the government prohibited holding the events in Taksim Square due to renovations, there were clashes between security forces and workers’ organizations.³ A month later, the Gezi Park events erupted,⁴ leading to a principled decision not to allow gatherings and demonstrations in Taksim Square, fearing renewed protests.

Therefore, the government's refusal to allow May Day events again this year led to a spirited protests on SNS, which influenced many people to go out into the streets and attempt to infiltrate Taksim and Kızılay Squares in the center of the capital.⁵ Once there, they clashed with police. Against this background, many users expressed their frustration with government's policy, adopting the slogan "We want peace on May Day."⁶



The assumption that the labor movement would relax after the May Day storm subsided was shattered by coal mine disaster in Soma which killed 301 miners. Coverage of the disaster was accompanied by increased activity on SNS expressing both solidarity with the trapped miners and criticizing how the Erdoğan government handled crisis.⁷

Most of all, surfers attacked the government for shirking its responsibility for the disaster. This criticism peaked after the speech of MP Özgür Özel from the Republican People's Party (CHP) demanding that parliament investigate the safety deficiencies documented at the mine two weeks before the explosion.⁸ The rejection of his official request by the majority faction of the AKP, together with the carelessness of company responsible for work at the mine, which was unable to provide the exact number of miners employed there, aroused great anger on SNS and in the streets alike. In Ankara, Istanbul and Izmir demonstrators confronted the police, while particularly severe clashes were reported in Soma. Several SNS provided a space for harsh statements accusing the government of murder, under the banner, "This isn't a work accident, its murder."⁹ The labor unions, which had clashed with the government after the May Day events, declared a general strike after the disaster and spread the news using Twitter.¹⁰

Propelled by the magnitude of the disaster, Erdoğan went to Soma where his statements only exacerbated the crisis, mainly because he avoided taking any responsibility for the failure. For example, he was quoted as saying, "Death is a natural thing in this profession," and he compared the



disaster in Soma to a similar tragedy in northern England in 1862.¹¹ The anachronistic comparison, and the fact that ministers who are directly responsible for the disaster were not dismissed, led to stormy demonstrations in Soma, forcing Erdoğan to escape the crowds ire by taking refuge in a local supermarket. At the store's entrance, Erdoğan confronted a demonstrator. According to a video from the site,

Erdoğan murmured: “Why are you running away, spawn of Israel?” Considering the situation, this was doubtlessly was a highly-derogatory comment. It soon became the hottest topic on SNS.¹² While many surfers criticized the Prime Minister’s statement,¹³ his supporters claimed that the video had been edited to distort the Erdoğan’s words and embarrass him.¹⁴ Turkish Foreign Ministry did not remain indifferent. Understanding the explosive potential inherent in the statement, the second secretary of the Turkish Embassy in Tel Aviv, Doğan Işık, issued a statement claiming that it had not actually been said and condemning distribution of the forgery.¹⁵

This embarrassing incident was compounded by a violent incident involving the Yusuf Yerkel, an advisor to Turkish Prime Minister, who was photographed kicking a protester in Soma. Photographs of the incident spread like wildfire, where they provoked strong reactions online and even led to a campaign calling on SOAS, University of London, to cancel the PhD degree awarded to Yerkel because of his behavior.¹⁶ SOAS then disclosed that he had never actually completed his studies.¹⁷ Although Yerkel apologized the next day and expressed remorse for his actions, the government continued to back him. One of Erdoğan’s senior advisers argued, for example, that he had acted in self-defense.¹⁸ Despite this support, due to harsh public criticism he was dismissed from his post.

The events on May Day and in response to the Soma mine disaster, as reflected SNS, again revealed the deep rift in Turkish society. This time, the gap between the government and its opponents appears so large that Turkish society is finding it hard to show any unity and solidarity, even on national days of mourning, such as those declared following the mine disaster. Moreover, after the events, discussions about the status, claims, rights and working conditions of workers returned to the headlines. These issues could potentially reignite class struggles in Turkey no less heated than those experienced over the last year.

The battle over allowances:

Reform of subsidies as reflected on social networks

Dr. Raz Zimmt

In early April, the Iranian government began to implement the second phase of the subsidy policy reform that started during Ahmadinejad’s government in 2010, which converted government subsidies on energy products, especially gasoline, electricity and gas, into monthly allowances for citizens. This reform, which was widely supported by politicians and economists at the time, has been fiercely criticized since the first stage of implementation. The allowances are a fixed amount distributed to

all citizens regardless of their income, and have created a severe budget shortfall. In addition, critics argued that the program was applied too fast which exacerbated inflation, and that the government did not meet its obligations to use 20% of the revenue from the reform to strengthen the manufacturing sector. When elected, President Hassan Rouhani stated that he intends to continue implementing the reform, and in addition, to introduce a number of amendments. In this context, prior to beginning implementation of the second stage, the government called on citizens to voluntarily forgo the allowances, if their financial situation allows it, to help reduce the deficit. The government promised to use funds thereby freed, *inter alia*, for improving health services and expanding eligibility for health insurance.¹⁹



“No to the allowances.”

Campaign symbol

For its effort to persuade the citizens to pass on the allowances, the government recruited politicians, cultural figures, athletes, prominent economists, business owners and student organizations for a campaign in traditional media and on social networks

(SNS), titled “No to the allowances.”²⁰ A group created on Facebook urged citizens to forgo their allowances to “strengthen the spirit of solidarity, and for the promotion and development of the state.”²¹ Senior clerics were also conscripted for the government effort, and published rulings holding that citizens who do not need allowances must forgo them.²² Parallel to their persuasive efforts, Iranian officials threatened to impose sanctions, including fines, on civilians who submitted false reports about their income in order to gain benefits.²³

Despite government efforts, when registration for the allowances was renewed, it became evident that the majority of applicants refused to forgo them. Opponents of the move even launched a number of Facebook pages, under the headings: “I will not give up, give me the allowances” and, “Do not cancel the allowances.”²⁴ However, it is important to note that while only a few were willing to give up allowances, many users expressed principled reservations about the lack of distinction between rich and poor when paying allowances, and called for people with high salaries forgo them. Be that as it may, at the end of the ten-day registration phase, it turned out that only about 2.5 million people had forgone the allowances, compared with about 73 million people (more than 92% of those eligible) who registered to receive them. Furthermore, about 40% of those who applied have reported that their monthly income less than 600,000 tomans (about USD 235), the lowest option for income level given on registration form.²⁵ This figure does not truly reflect citizen’s income levels, and apparently expresses the reluctance of many to report on their real income, fearing denial of eligibility for allowances or being charged additional taxes.

Users listed several key reasons for refusing to give up the allowances. Many of them claimed they could not give up the benefits because of the economic crisis. Some expressed concern about the future and noted that even though they do not currently need the allowances, they may in the future if the economic situation worsens. Another argument raised dealt with the basic right of the Iranian people to enjoy the state's oil revenues; therefore, the government must not deny them this



Forgoing the allowances

right, regardless of their economic situation. Paraphrasing the slogan, "Nuclear energy is our absolute right" some surfers defined receiving the allowances as, "The absolute right of citizens." Another argument reflected citizens' criticism of the government's performance and then national priorities that guides them. Many complained that the government is not transparent about the distribution of the state budget and invests funds in inappropriate purposes, such as assistance to foreign organizations, especially in the Arab world. One surfer wrote that he would not give up benefits for fear that the money will be directed to "the benefit of Hamas, Lebanon and Syria." In this spirit, a satirical Facebook page was launched called, "We ask Bashar Assad to forgo the allowances."²⁶

This shows how discourse on SNS exposes the public's basic distrust of official institutions, particularly of the government. Some surfers attribute this mistrust to the conduct of the previous governments, while others attribute it to the spread of corruption in government institutions and the immoral conduct of elected officials. "Other than lies, dishonesty, deceit and corruption we have seen nothing from the government, so we do not rely on the government, and will not give up the benefits," wrote one surfer.²⁷

It is apparent that the near total refusal of the Iranian people to give up their allowances and join the effort to improve the national economy is a further expression of the problem of social solidarity, and a growing tendency toward individualism in Iranian society, which we previously noted here.²⁸ Moreover, the results of the registration for allowances indicate that the discourse on SNS is an authentic expression of public sentiment that has disappeared from the official media. Before implementation of the second stage reform, the head of the Subsidy Reform Organization, Akbar Izadi, claimed that that public opinion surveys conducted by the government found great willingness on the part of citizens to give up the allowances.²⁹ A similar trend was also reflected in street interviews with civilians that were broadcast on national television. However, even in early stages of the registration process, the discourse on SNS revealed a completely different picture that was confirmed when the registration data was published. This is further

evidence of the importance of using SNS as an effective tool for assessing public sentiment.

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- ¹ “Başbakan Erdoğan ilk kez “Kürdistan” dedi”, Takvim, (November 16, 2013)
<http://www.takvim.com.tr/Guncel/2013/11/16/basbakan-erdogan-ilk-kez-kurdistan-dedi>
- ² “Kanlı 1 Mayıs’tan Bayram 1 Mayıs’a”, Hürriyet, May 1, 2010,²
<http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/haber.aspx?id=14585947&tarih=2010-05-01>
- ³ “Bekir Bozdağ: 1 Mayıs konusunda teşekkürü hak ediyoruz”, Hürriyet, May 1, 2013
<http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/23179913.asp>
- ⁴ For more on these events, see Hay Eytan Cohen Yanaracak “Istanbul United”, *The Jerusalem Post* (June 5, 2013) <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Op-Ed-Contributors/Istanbul-united-315566>
- ⁵ #1MayısEmekciBayramı 1mayıs Emekcinin Bayramı #1Mayıs #1MayıstaTaksimdeyiz
- ⁶ #1MayıstaHuzurlıstiyoruz
- ⁷ #Soma #GünKömürKarası #somafaciası #AklımızKalbimizSomada #BugunCumabugunSomabugunDua #prayforTurkey
- ⁸ Özgür Özel’in Meclisteki Soma Konuşması, CNN Türk, (May 14, 2014)
<http://www.cnnurk.com/video/turkiye/ozgur-ozelin-meclisteki-soma-konusmasi>
- ⁹ #İsKazasıDeğilCinayet
- ¹⁰ #GenelGrev #UlusalYasGenelGrev
- ¹¹ “Erdoğan: İngiltere’de 1862’deki göçükte 204 kişi öldü”, Radikal, (May 14, 2014)
http://www.radikal.com.tr/turkiye/erdogan_ingilterede_1862deki_gocukte_204_kisi_oldu-1192088
- ¹² “İsrail Dölü”
- ¹³ #BuYumrukHepimize
- ¹⁴ “MontajLobisi İşbaşında “
- ¹⁵ “Dışişleri Bakanlığı’ndan “İsrail Dölü” açıklaması”, Milliyet, (May 18, 2014)
<http://www.milliyet.com.tr/disisleri-bakanligi-ndan-israil-gundem-1884281/>
- ¹⁶ “Yavuz Yerke”
- ¹⁷ “Yusuf Yerke’in SOAS’tan doktorası yokmuş” , Hürriyet, (May 15, 2014)
<http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dunya/26425642.asp>
- ¹⁸ “Akdoğan: Yerke kendini savundu”, Hürriyet, May 16, 2014
<http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/26428918.asp>
- ¹⁹ <http://bit.ly/1kh5O0o>.
- ²⁰ <http://bit.ly/1m5qjya>.
- ²¹ <http://on.fb.me/1jc0rkY>
- ²² <http://bit.ly/1hLqCi8> <http://bit.ly/1iALzNk>
- ²³ <http://bit.ly/1hNzzDh>
- ²⁴ <http://on.fb.me/1mTyIsm> ;<http://on.fb.me/1knUveL/>
- ²⁵ <http://bit.ly/1m5klgJ>.
- ²⁶ <http://on.fb.me/1nYF07q>.
- ²⁷ Surfers’ comments translated here were selected from <http://bit.ly/1iwNXj2> ,<http://bit.ly/QTy54t> ,
<http://bit.ly/1fLVLOx> ,<http://bit.ly/1m5AerX> ,<http://bit.ly/1ivBB0N> ,<http://on.fb.me/1nYLbIR> ,
<http://bit.ly/1iARl1w> ,<http://bit.ly/1ivBLFa>
- ²⁸ <http://bit.ly/1pJfsje>
- ²⁹ <http://bit.ly/1lsG2ZE>