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"Sustainability" of the Green Movement in Turkey

Bülent Duru

Having witnessed the striking results of the discord between economy and ecology, Turkey has reached high figures in economic indicators with the policies pursued in the recent years on the one hand and started to figure among countries with the most accelerated pace of pollution on the other hand. Undoubtedly, it will be written one day when a history of the environment is penned that the years when the country was ruled by the AKP (Justice and Development Party) was a period when natural assets and historical values were irrevocably destroyed.

One cannot argue that this situation, which is due to the domination of ecological concerns by economic justifications, is adequately known, interrogated and brought into the agenda in Turkey. The problems stemming from the sacrifice of the natural balance for the sake of economic growth have been accepted as areas of interest exclusively for a limited number of environmentalists, concerned groups and experts. While one reason for this situation was the concern for votes or extreme academic specialization, the other reason was that the country lacked the economic and social structure to support a strong environmentalist or green organization.

Therefore, this article will purport to assess the potential options that may be brought to the agenda for the environmentalism and green movement to achieve success as a movement in the political arena by departing from its structural problems, the barriers it faces and the challenges it has encountered. Initially, the usual handicaps of pursuits originating from nature will be touched upon, then the current picture of the movement will be drawn; finally, a discussion will be carried out what the answers to the question "What is to be done?" could be.

A) Handicaps of the green thinking

Engaging in politics in a country like Turkey with the environmental problems taken as the essential point of departure has a sui generis status with its pros and cons. It can be argued that a great majority of people see themselves as natural supporters of the environmental movement. In a sense, they even tacitly ratify a great part of the activities in this field. A similar situation also applies to the media and academy. This tacit support of the people and the public opinion is also reflected on the governmental bodies in a way. For example, the environmentalists or greens are not perceived as dangerous as groups such as the Alawites, Kurds, conscientious objectors, etc. This situation may have had an impact on the fact that the environmentalists and greens were able to raise their voice a bit more as compared to other movements after the military coup on 12 September 1980. However, the mentioned support is but a tacit approval that is only inwardly given; it is not an active contribution that would contribute to the growth and strengthening of this movement. The environmentalists and greens are asked to be alert and take action in the face of damage to nature, but they are not provided with concrete support. The question "Where are these environmentalists?" is probably sufficient to explain the situation.

The domination of ecology by economy

The attempt to bring environmental problems onto the political agenda in Turkey faces significant handicaps stemming from the relatively short history of green thought in this country. The lack of a strong green

movement in a country like Turkey, which has not achieved its social-economic progress in all aspects, failed to reflect its growth onto its entire geography, has been going through a tumultuous process of transition into modernity, needs to be seen as a normal situation. As if confirming the phrase "The biggest environmental problem is poverty," said by Indra Gandhi during the Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, 1972, it is not surprising that environmentalism is perceived by us as "luxury" while there are more vital problems at stake.

Delay in industrialization and urbanization

It is only natural that the green movement of a country, which has been late in reaching the industrialization and urbanization stage and ridden by troubles in its political system, lags behind the green movements in countries that reached the maturity of the consumer society. For instance, we started to experience the environmental problems caused by mechanization later than the industrialized countries. The problems that now seem ordinary for us such as air pollution, hazardous waste, etc. are relatively new issues considering the entire history of the country.

There are important connections between the short history of the latent urbanization process, in other words, the fact that most of us live in urban settlements rather than rural areas, and the current situation of the green movement. In that respect, one should not forget that the problems stemming from the co-habitation of a great number of people on a small area have recently started to emerge. Issues such as traffic, waste, etc. have been problems on the agenda of only the last few generations. In short, one can argue that the late emergence of these problems caused the delay in taking a joint action for solution by environmentally-oriented movements.

Rural areas seen as a symbol of poverty

Since we have had a delay in industrialization and urbanization, we maintained our connection with the rural areas for a long time. Even though we have recently been drawing away from the rural areas in spatial terms, we can say that most of us have traces of the rural areas in our origin dating back to a few generations ago and an important part of us maintains our connection with the rural areas at least in spiritual sense by means of relatives and fellow countrymen. It seems that there is an important problem caused by this situation with respect to environmental problems. The empty lands, natural assets in urban areas remind us of the rural areas and poverty. Therefore, we want to construct something immediately on a place that we perceive as "empty space", erect a building, in short, to "develop it". We perceive rural areas or empty spaces as indicators of underdevelopment.1 It is evident that the green movement is seen as one of the barriers that would hamper these steps in the way of "growth", "development".

The layout of the land

One may consider that one of the reasons why the green movement has been weak, in other words, the reason why we have remained insensitive to environmental values, could be related to the layout of our land. Since the lands have been owned or supervised by the state since the Byzantine times and throughout the Ottoman period, it has been easy to own the land to bring it into use or to see the natural assets as resources that should be reclaimed from the state and used as rapidly as possible. It appears that this situation is strongly linked to the construction of shanty houses on the land owned by the Treasury, build-up of illegal floors onto luxurious mansions, filling of the shores with concrete or current examples such as the urban transformation and 2B land practices.

Nomadism

There are some people who attribute the reason why green thought has not been popular in this country to the fact that our approach to nature has not been very friendly, we switched to permanent settlement too late

and that we are actually a nomadic society. According to this opinion, we are not able to adopt our settlement areas and natural assets as a habitat, therefore, we see them as resources that should be exploited and consumed as soon as possible. For example, it is possible to see traces of our nomadism in the fact that we decorate our houses with nice articles and ornaments whereas our outer environment looks deplorable. Even though this seems to be an argument with an explanatory power as it points out to an important problem, we know not only that the nomadic societies actually led a life in harmony with nature, but also that other peoples that inhabited Anatolia much earlier than Turks and settled on these lands much earlier, such as the Kurds, are not very different in that respect, either. Therefore, one should take this explanation with a grain of salt.

Islam

The origins of our society's volte face from the nature may be searched in Islam. Even though there are attempts by some religious circles to discover environmentalist verses in the Koran -in a way similar to searching evidence in Das Kapital of the environmentally-friendliness of Marx-, there is no doubt that Islam has a human-oriented mentality in its core as in other celestial religions. It may be considered that the current way in which Islam is practiced stands as a barrier against in the solution of the solution of environmental problems and the strengthening of the green movement judging by the sacrifice of animals to the encouragement of population increase or rapprochement with capitalism. However, in spite of all these, one can notice that Islam emphasizes the value of all living beings as part of its essence, encourages a modest way of life, attaches special importance to natural values, thus argue that the explanatory power of religion-based reasons would remain constrained.

A short glance at the conditions under which the green movement, which is striving to do politics in the shadow of all these infrastructural challenges, may give some clues about the troubles experienced today.

B) Status of the green movement

The greens in Turkey, which incorporate participants from very diverse backgrounds in terms of their worldviews, represent a movement that does not have a long-standing past, is not involved in traditional political lines and has not been as effective in the social field as its Western examples.2

Taking into account that the first resonating environmental demonstration was held in Taşucu, Silifke in 1977 upon the rumors about the establishment of a nuclear power plant in Akkuyu,3 the first green protest held in Kızılay, Ankara in 1983 by the greens from Germany against the human rights violations in Turkey4 and the establishment of the first Green Party (Yeşiller Partisi) in 1988, it would not be misleading to say that the green/environmentalist movement has a history of roughly thirty-forty years.5

Today, the number of political formations that have the ecological distress, environmental problems or natural assets within their areas of interest is not high. Following the Green Party, which was established in 1988 and reached the end of its political life in 1994, we had to wait until the year 2008 for the establishment of a political party that dealt with the environment. The newly founded Green Party decided to merge with the EDP (Emek ve Demokrasi Partisi - Labor and Democracy Party) in 2012 and maintain its existence under the umbrella of "Yeşiller ve Sol Gelecek Partisi" (Greens and Left Future Party). Undoubtedly, the parties with the word green or environment in their name do not only consist in these two, there are also formations such as "Gönül Birliği Yeşiller Partisi" (Harmony Green Party) or "Hayvan Partisi" (Animal Party), which are the products of narrow circles or function as voluntary organization.

No matter how high the number of parties is, it is not easy to talk about a robust and widespread green political tradition or to make optimistic predictions about the future of that movement in Turkey. In conclusion, the environmentalists and greens are both mentioned among "marginal" groups such as anti-war

movement members, conscientious objectors, gays, atheists and may be politically ignored since they have a very small potential for gaining votes.

Problems in founding a party

For Yeşiller Partisi (Green Party), which has a history that can be deemed to be relatively short, it would be more meaningful to accept the period at stake as the years of foundation and search rather than assessing its success retrospectively. As it will be explained in further detail below, the movement encountered the structural problems of doing politics in a poor country on the one hand and dealt with the repercussions of the chronic problems of the left on the other hand.

The most important disadvantage of the green movement in Turkey is due to the discrepancy between its own raison d'etre and the wishes of the people. The wish to live in better conditions within the existing economic and special system is only possible by damaging the environment. The Green Party will automatically be opposed by a great section of the society that expects a better life within this system when it acts in accordance with its own principles.

One of the factors that negatively affect the success of the greens in political life is that almost all parties included the environmental problems somehow in their programs and agendas, leaving the Green Party non-functional. For example, a look at the program of the BDP (Peace and Democracy Party), the party of electorate for whom the green movement may feel an affinity, reveals that a special importance is attached to the ecological distress, natural assets and urban problems.6

Another hurdle agaisnt the growth of the green movement has been the fact that it has included participants from very diverse backgrounds of the political spectrum. This situation, which could actually have been an indicator of both the support of wider sectors of the society and the richness of thoughts, has had a negative impact on the green parties. For example, the tension between the greens and environmentalists, two founding elements of the party in the first Green Party, brought about the end of the party; the differences of opinion within the Green Party resulted in a merger with EDP.

3) Possibilities for the growth of the green movement

It would not seem realistic to expect the green movement, which has to deal with the sui generis difficulties of making politics based on the nature on the one hand and has a limited growth potential as a vein that is supplied by the leftist tradition on the other hand, to become massive and turn into an important political actor. The green movement should be deemed to have fulfilled its function to the extent that it can influence the political powers, actors and groups that are outside itself.

The green thought is essentially targeted at the "potential" problems of the future generations rather than the "real" troubles of people today. In order to have such an understanding, to be able to defend the green thought or to internalize the values that it defends, one should first be able to meet essential vital requirements smoothly and go through an educational process that would facilitate green awareness-raising, to put it more clearly, not be poor and uneducated. Therefore, the currents originating from the green thought become already automatically obliged to do politics in a mood of being left alone on their own as they appeal to a small number of supporters in a country like Turkey.

Highlighting the problems in daily life

To be able to render green thought effective in the political arena and to appeal to a wider section of the society, it seems unavoidably necessary to take efforts targeted at the current problems, to take an interest in "local" requirements rather than "global" ones, to pursue politics related to daily life rather than issues that are deemed to be "luxury" by an important part of the society.

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If the movement sees itself limited only to the environmental problems or environmental protection due to the sui generis structural problems of Turkey, this would limit its potential for success in this land. Actually, one can say that this situation is similar to the ones in other countries. This is the truth underlying the fact that the Turkish workers in Germany, who would vote for AKP (Justice and Development Party) if they were to live in Turkey, vote for the Green Party.

Instead of subjects such as climate change, for instance, which people do not hold close to their heart, more local and more familiar problems such as poverty, housing, draught, etc. may be brought to the foreground in order to overcome this mentioned barrier in the party activities. Subjects that seem abstract and distant as in the example of climate change may be dealt with by being brought closer in place and time –namely, by addressing their concrete effects in Turkey and in the present time– so that they can be perceived more easily and more attention can be attracted.

Appealing to the actual needs of the people

Similarly, green policies should be developed based on an awareness of the real agenda of people and the problems they experience. For example, news about 2B lands or urban transformation, subjects such as the "loss of natural assets" or "unplanned urbanization" create more negative associations for the environmentalist groups, leftists and educated people. However, it is not possible to say the same thing about wider sections of the society embroiled in problems; these words signify the hope of switching to a more comfortable way of life for an important part of the society. People believe that they will move from shack houses to apartments, that the values of their houses will increase thanks to these laws. For that reason, it is necessary to work on more realistic, more feasible policy proposals for every problem even if they are difficult to implement.

Appealing to those who are excluded from profit and interest distribution

Indeed, one of the reasons why the environmental problems in Turkey have increased is that the land-related activities in horizontal and vertical directions have become intensified to assure economic success for some time. Its visible results are undoubtedly the urban transformation and skyscrapers on the vertical plane and the 2B and Hydraulic Power Plants on the horizontal plane. The extreme use of land on both planes causes environmental problems on the one hand and cause the accumulated profits to be transferred to specific sectors on the other hand. Undoubtedly, the extension of the electoral base of AKP is at least partially based on this mentioned interests shared and profits (rant in Turkish) distributed. For this reason, new policies that focus on the troubles of sectors that are unable to gain their shares from the distribution of the new value generated from land, propose the richness inherent in the land to be distributed to the entire society in a balanced way and also help the protection of natural assets should be developed.

Partnership with the environmental movement in Anatolia

It is observed that the demonstrations against increasing environmental problems have become more rampant, that the nuclear power plant projects, mine exploration activities, urban transformation practices and hydraulic power plant construction have triggered an environmental movement especially in the recent period. Even though one gets the idea that this situation provides an important opportunity for the green movement, that there is a favorable ground for growth at a first glance, it will be understood that the mentioned resurgence will actually not have effects as positive as the ones imagined by the movement based on a deeper analysis of the emerging picture.

It should not be forgotten that local people and villagers that take action against the lethal damage inflicted by the construction, mining and energy investments of the government on nature are actually not environmentalists; that they only react to the deterioration of their own habitats, weakening of their means of

life, and that they are most probably AKP voters. Perhaps, it would be more appropriate to explain this situation with the word “nimby” (not in my backyard) as used by the Westerners.

To put it in another way, the villagers who are resisting the hydraulic power plants actually merely oppose to the construction of the power plant nearby the place they live in, they have no problems with the hydraulic power plants or other unclean energy resources; therefore, it may be misleading to qualify the actions of the movement as being green or environmentalist. Also, there is no doubt that the reactions shown throughout the country have a potential to increase the impact of the green movement even though they may not be enough to expand it.

Possible supporters of the green movement

At this point, the obvious question would be: “If the anti-hydraulic power plant movements throughout Anatolia are not to grow the green movement, what should be done so that the environmentalist struggle achieves success?” The best thing to do is probably to expand the target audience by creating associations between the oppression and exploitation of nature by humanbeings and the societal events. The corresponding audience in Turkey naturally consists of the Kurds, Alawites and other disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, the concrete conditions that would make such a partnership a natural one are also present. Forests burned, villages evacuated, destruction of ancient cities with dams, large-scale confiscations, forced migration... All of these are environmental problems as well.

Future of the green movement

Unless a radical change in the industrialization and urbanization tendencies takes place, the limits of use for the air, water and land will be reached; therefore, everyone will have to switch to a simpler, more sensitive way of living as desired by the green thought today; naturally, this will be in accordance with the nature of capitalism and to the extent permitted by it. To be realistic, the largest contribution of the green movement may be to further emphasize its mentioned voluntary simplicity and way of living in harmony with the environment. In the past, environmental problems were known as marginal problems; now everyone somehow experiences these problems since they have become a part of daily life. Given that the tomatoes are sprayed with hormone, the air is polluted, the traffic is congested, the forests are burned, the streams are blocked with dams, shores have turned into concrete blocks, it naturally follows that the environmental movement will become stronger. Let us hope that people will one day think of the green movement and not the Islamic movement when the word ‘green’ is mentioned.

Footnotes

1) Bülent Duru, Doğayı AKP’den Korumak (Protecting the Nature against AKP), Radikal İki, 7 November 2010.Environment – Green Distinction

2) Even though it may appear that there are no differences between them and they sometimes refer to the same concepts, the terms environmentalist and green actually refer to different concepts. The word ‘environmentalist’ is rather used to refer to activists that conduct efforts for the protection of environment and elimination of pollution and engage in “constructive” actions within the established order. As for the word ‘green’, it actually denotes more radical activists who depart from the idea that environmental problems are actually reflections of existing economic-political problems and see the environmental problems as part of politics.

3) Erol Özbek, “Biz Zaten Ölmüşüz” (We are Already Dead), Yeni Gündem, S. 13, 2-8, June, 1986, pages 26, 27.

4) Tanıl Bora, "80'lerde Yeşil Hareket: Salonlardan Sokaklara (Green Movement in the 80s: From Halls to Streets), Sokak, Issue 19, 31, December, pages 20, 21.

5) Bülent Duru, "Türkiye'de Çevrenin Siyasallaşması: Yeşiller Partisi Deneyimi" (The Experience of Politicization of Environment in Turkey: The Green Party Experience), Mülkiye, Issue 236, Volume 24, September-October 2002, pages 179-200.

6) Program of the Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi (Peace and Democracy Party) (bdp.org.tr)

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