THE NEWSPAPER BIRGÜN AND 'OUR NEIGHBORHOOD'

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By Taner Akcam, The Armenian Weekly, 27 September 2010

In May 2010, the Turkish Parliament changed 26 different articles of the constitution, which had been created by the military regime that came to power in the coup of Sept. 12, 1980. However, because the necessary two-thirds majority could not be obtained in the parliament, the changes had to be submitted for a popular vote. By a "coincidence," the referendum took place on Sept. 12, 2010. The changes included a series of arrangements in the fields of economic and social rights, individual rights, and the judiciary; they were intended to bring the constitution into compliance with European Union standards. Fifty-eight percent of the people voted "yes" in the referendum, and 42 percent used their vote to say "no." Those voting negatively were largely supporters of the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), and were members of the military or civil bureaucracy. A lesser number belonged to small left wing organizations. The Peace and Democracy Party (BDP, a Kurdish party) called for a boycott of the referendum, and a majority of the people living in cities with a large Kurdish population complied. Serious debates and fissures took place in Turkey about why one voted yes or no, or about the boycott. Even though I personally took the "it is not enough, but 'yes'" position, the article below was not written for the purpose of supporting or disavowing any position; it is an attempt to understand and explain why the debates about the referendum were so violent and why there are other issues involved that go deeper than a simple yes or no. The article is written very much "from the inside"; many events and people were only summarily mentioned with the assumption that these would be familiar to readers. Consequently, I added some explanatory footnotes in this English version. Perhaps the article can help the readers of the Armenian Weekly to understand the current political developments in Turkey from a different perspective, and show them how these debates are directly and indirectly related to the Armenian Genocide.

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voted yes or no, or about the boycott. Even though I personally took the "it is not enough, but 'yes'" position, the article below was not written for the purpose of supporting or disavowing any position; it is an attempt to understand and explain why the debates about the referendum were so violent and why there are other issues involved that go deeper than a simple yes or no. The article is written very much "from the inside"; many events and people were only summarily mentioned with the assumption that these would be familiar to readers. Consequently, I added some explanatory footnotes in this English version. Perhaps the article can help the readers of the Armenian Weekly to understand the current political developments in Turkey from a different perspective, and show them how these debates are directly and indirectly related to the Armenian Genocide.

The newspaper Birgün came out with the headline "The Nationalist Conservative Picture Still Did Not Change" after the results of the referendum. According to the newspaper, "in the country, the ratio of 60 percent on the right to 40 percent on the left was solidified. Nationalist conservative votes consolidated around the AKP ." You did not read this incorrectly. According to the newspaper, 40 percent of those saying "no" to the referendum were leftists, and the 60 percent that said "yes" were rightists.

In the courses that I teach on mass annihilation, when I come to the topic of Yugoslavia, one of the important questions that I ask students is how a person and an organization using the adjectives "communist" and "socialist" to define themselves were able to organize a genocide of Muslims. Naturally, in recalling the mass murders conducted during the Stalinist and Maoist eras, it can be objected, "Is this a real question?"

It is true that the mass annihilation of people both in China and the Soviet Union always existed as an internal structural problem. For example, despite the fact that in China, the Great Leap Forward in 1958 or the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s encompassed the true destruction of masses, they unfortunately were celebrated by leftists for many long years as great and important steps in the history of mankind. My goal, however, is not to open this page of history. Let us look at Milosevic, in the contemporary era: An active member of the Yugoslav Communist Part until 1990, after 1990 Milosevic became the founder of the Serbian Socialist Party and the president of the state of Yugoslavia and Serbia. He died in 2006, as a result of a heart attack he experienced at the court where he was being tried for genocide and crimes against humanity.

How did it happen that Milosevic, a leftist and socialist of Yugoslavia and Serbia, began to lead the nationalist movement, and became the organizer of crimes against humanity in Croatia and Kosovo, and genocide against the Bosnians? I found the answer to this question in the headline of the newspaper Birgün. Here I want to apologize to those readers of this newspaper who did not approve of this headline and found it wrong. My intention is not a general accusation. My intention is simply to show the gravity of this sentence to those who wish to see this headline in Birgün as "a little accident" or an error that perhaps should not have been made but should also not in turn be overstated. The Birgün newspaper, as far as I know, did not run a retraction or publish any criticism

of the headline. If anyone of us is looking for Milosevic, it is here at this address that he is to be found. If you were unable to understand why Milosevic became a nationalist, and why, without blinking, he was able to organize mass killings, read the headline of Birgün.

One of the dozens of questions that are necessary for us to answer is how the Birgün newspaper counted that 40 percent as leftist. What is it that makes the CHP, which opposed the changes in the Turkish constitution along with the MHP, the military-civilian bureaucratic team that organizes and defends military coups, and even the bourgeoisie of Istanbul that expresses itself in the newspaper Hürriyet, "leftist"? It is clear that this is directly related to hating the AKP in Turkey. There are many ideological and other modes of explanation that could have been helpful in understanding this hatred. I could have attempted to say a few things about ideological choices, including the influence of Kemalism, a powerful feeling of laicism, fears creating the perception of Islam as sharia (the rule of Islamic law), and even the related understanding of socialism and the latter's denigrating point of view stating that democracy is the "work of the bourgeoisie." However, after thinking about the subject, I have come to believe that the concept of "neighborhood" (mahalle) will be the best explanatory metaphor for understanding Milosevic in the Birgün newspaper. This "neighborhood" in Birgün, which makes the boundary between nationalism and leftism meaningless, is imaginary.

Turkey was founded on "our neighborhood" and "the other neighborhood." In other words, the entire fabric of our social and political life as communities living in Turkey, because of the cultural worlds enveloping the latter, is formed around two main arteries. These arteries are like two different neighborhoods, and basically are foreign to one another. The establishment of these neighborhoods and their formation perhaps extend back to the beginning of the 19th century. But let us examine how they are today.

In one of these neighborhoods, there are "city dwellers." They can be defined as largely of the lower and middle classes, composed of officials, soldiers, and others, with their main axis the bureaucracy (later, the bourgeoisie—TUSIAD—created with the support of the military and civil bureaucracy, was added). The Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) and the CHP are the political parties of this neighborhood. The political culture and cornerstones of discourse of this neighborhood basically were furnished by this school. The "other neighborhood" is formed more from villagers and artisans.

"We" (intellectuals, those who got involved with the left as leftists) are primarily the children of "this neighborhood." The other neighborhood is a community defining itself more by religious values. At present it is opening up and expanding. At that time, however, that neighborhood remained fixed in its place, and there was no question of any process by which it would attempt to come over to our side. And the questions that interested us were largely connected with the internal affairs of "our neighborhood." The relationship between that neighborhood and our neighborhood was founded primarily on our rulers manipulating that neighborhood, and sometimes using it as "troops at the ready to volunteer." As I said, however, they stopped there, and there was no big question of their working to come and cross over to our neighborhood. Today's problems have begun with the

confusing of the borders of the neighborhoods.

We leftists were continually quarreling with the officials of our quarter—our entire lives were spent in quarrels with them. We wished to overthrow them and to make ourselves rulers. At first we wanted to replace the officials of our neighborhood with the help of other officials (like young officers) who were closer to us. With this not happening, we even embraced weapons ourselves. But there also were ties of kinship between our rulers and us. We got angry at the CHP, but nearly all of us spent our childhoods in its backyard. There was no one among us who did not become involved with the CHP in some way, and had some contact with it in one phase of our lives. We were not pleased that the CHP did "little" of what was necessary to be done. Many of us, even after the military coup d'état of Sept. 12, 1980, went to the CHP in order to change it. Our passion to take over the CHP from the inside was rather excessive, because CHP was the "house of the lord" where the true work was going to be finished. We were all relatives of the CHP, we were its spouses, we were its intimates; its officials were our close—I mean really close—acquaintances. We were all together with it in unions, professional organizations, and cultural activities—we were engaged with the CHP on many levels.

Our officials oppressed us greatly—they brought out through our noses what we sucked through our mouths—but the CHP was an intermediary channel, a connecting bridge, which established our relations with them. This is to say that, in the end, the military bureaucratic officials of our neighborhood, and their party the CHP, were also finally "ours." They were the people we were acquainted with and knew of "our neighborhood." For this reason, the military coup d'état of 1960, which was the work of our neighborhood, is still a wound in our hearts. We discussed under which conditions we would support (the military coup d'état of) March 12, 1971, and we hung posters on the walls of our universities saying "if you do this, we will support you." These, too, were like the internal affairs of the neighborhood.

My brother was tortured for nine years as a result of Sept. 12, but he returned from death. My father fled with difficulty from 12 September to Europe. And yet, many close CHP friends, foremost among them Muammer Aksoy, came to Europe to defend Sept. 12. Muammer Amca was our "uncle," a prison friend of my father (after 12 March 1971), an intimate of our family, and a person of our neighborhood. Muammer Amca was also my lawyer, presumably… These were the types of ties connecting us to this regime, like blood relations. We said that we would overthrow them, that we would carry out a revolution, but for many of them, we were "our children." I remember that the last time I saw İlhan Selçuk in Istanbul, he told me things in this vein. I can count dozens of similar "our neighborhood" relationships.

The situation has begun to change now. The "other neighborhood" is coming. We do not know anybody from this "other neighborhood." Even in our most difficult days, we always used the relationships of spouse, uncle, and other intimates with the ruling power of "our neighborhood." We wanted our acquaintances to be our intercessors. With the "other neighborhood" coming, things can get mixed up a bit; there is no spouse, uncle, friend, and so forth there. This creates a strange feeling

of emptiness. A strange feeling of uncertainty and fear…Although we are not in a way in power, we are losing the ruling capacity of this neighborhood and our own place in it. This seems to be a problem for us. The possibility that the other neighborhood could be "more democratic" is already very frightening. We do not even want to hear this; because our neighborhood is praised as being "modern" and "progressive" in comparison with the other neighborhood. Is it not the race for "progressivism" which unites us with the CHP and separates us? As for the other neighborhood, it is "reactionary" and "bigoted."

From the perspective of my field of interest, when looking at society and history from the framework of mass killings and their causes, this neighborhood and the issue of different main arteries, and the cultural world created by the main artery, takes on a more frightening and scary aspect. The 1915 Armenian Genocide was the work of the rulers of our neighborhood; they used a part of the other neighborhood for this "work." There is God above; the other neighborhood greatly aided this annihilation. There are economic interests, and the matter of religion (the Armenians were gavur, non-believers, so that upon killing them, one goes to heaven, and so forth). Again, above there is God; there were honest officials from our neighborhood who opposed 1915, but most again were the pious Muslims from the other neighborhood.

The rulers of our neighborhood threw bombs on the mountains of Dersim in 1938. The name Dersim was forbidden—they called it Tunceli. Now the party of the other neighborhood (AKP) has again thrust the word "Dersim" onto the agenda. "The Dersim massacre," it said. But this does not cut it with us leftists. Saying about a prime minister who says "the state bombed Dersim," "he is a fraud," and so forth, we do not find what he said sufficient, and turn up our noses. But we who do not find the attitude of the other neighborhood about Dersim sufficient, do not perceive any problem in seeing that those who dropped bombs on Dersim are "of us," calling them "leftists," and even bargaining with them at election time over members of parliament.

We find that the person calling a murderer "murderer" is not doing enough, and we turn our noses up at him, but we see no constraint in being side by side with a killer. Our anger at the person calling a murderer murderer is so great that we are not even aware of our closeness to the murderer. We very easily accuse the AKP of being without courage, fearful, and insufficiently democratic, but we do not even want to see the existence of the picture of it having the courage to say "the state has rained bombs upon Dersim," while we stand side by side with the bomb volleyer. At the side of the murderers, we go to the ballot box with them to cast the same vote, we negotiate with them concerning parliamentary deputies, and we yell "coward" at the one coming from the other side. If only we turned once and looked at who was at our side.

I wanted to explain why our left was not able to confront the crimes in Turkey's history, and give the answer through this concept of neighborhood. We do not take taking a stand about historical crimes as seriously as the anger we feel towards the other neighborhood; because in our neighborhood, there is a culture that dominates both our officials and us. We explain these crimes, these massacres

all by means of this cultural world of ours: The Armenians? They, while we were fighting the war of independence, cooperated with the imperialists; The Dersim people? They represented a backwards and feudal system, and even if we perhaps found the massacres severe, it was necessary for us to understand that progressive and modern relations were breaking the hegemony of feudalism (ağalık). I could multiply the number of examples. Confronting history was not important compared with the hostility with the other neighborhood. I think that without discussing the matter of two separate neighborhoods, we cannot understand much about this question of two major cultural currents.

Now we are deepening this division between these neighborhoods. For this reason, the reverberations of Milosevic in Birgün's headline is not a coincidence. Because there the heritage of the Committee of Union Party and CHP is forced to play its last trump cards against the other neighborhood. The last trump is the nationalism of our neighborhood, and for this reason, there is not too much to constrain the MHP also being considered as leftist. After all, our Bolshevik elders greeted Enver Pasha as an anti-imperialist hero at the Baku Congress in 1920. Even this information has remained an unimportant detail to be forgotten among us.

The real question is how the profound abyss between the neighborhoods can be bridged. Confronting history will be very important for the question of the unity or disunity of these neighborhoods. The last two hundred years of mankind's history saw the opening up and finishing with a number of fields about which fighting took place. Class struggle was one of these fields—it became mixed up a little with the sphere of national conflict. Later gender and the environment emerged as new spheres of conflict and related struggles. Somebody who took a very commendable position in one of these areas of conflict could adopt a very bad stance in another area. Now memory is emerging as a new field of conflict. Confronting our history would again winnow people and circles which held different positions in previous conflicts like grain on the threshing floor. The deep chasm between our neighborhoods may be removed through the framework of an honest confrontation of history, but it can also grow deeper, as through the Birgün headline. If we look in the mirror and show the courage to confront our crimes, our task is easy! The other possibility? There are enough examples in history. This is why I brought up the issue with Milosevic.

The Turkish version of this article was published in Turkish in Taraf on Sept. 27, 2010.

Endnotes

The Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, or "Republican People's Party," which was the political party that established the Republic of Turkey, was founded by Mustafa Kemal. It is generally seen as the continuation of the Committee of Union and Progress, which organized the Armenian Genocide.

The Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, or "Nationalist Movement Party," is an ultra-nationalist political party which is known for its views similar to Nazism.

This is a leftist newspaper. It was founded in 2004 by people who were close to the socialist Marxist movement Devrimci Yol (Revolutionary Path) in the 1970s. The number of issues sold is estimated to be in the range of 5,000. Hrant Dink was one of its regular columnists, but he complained to his close friends that his articles sometimes were being censored.

TUSIAD: Türkiye Sanayi ve İşadamları Derneği, or "Association of Industrialists and Businessmen of Turkey," is Turkey's top business association.

In Turkey attempts at getting participation in mass attacks against those on the left were organized in the 1960s, and against Alevis and leftist organizations in the 1970s. Over 200 Alevis and leftists were killed in December 1978 in Marash, and about 60 in May 1980 in Çorum. In July 1993, 35 people (Alevis and leftist intellectuals) were burned alive in a hotel in Sivas and killed. Generally rightist, Islamist, and nationalist youth played an active role in these attacks. Today it is accepted that these actions were carried out largely by organizations known as counter-guerrillas inside the Turkish armed forces.

This refers to the various coup efforts which young officers with leftist views attempted to organize in 1969-70.

This refers to various left socialist organizations which sprung from the youth movement and defended the line of armed struggle in various tones during 1970-72.

This military coup of 12 September 1980 passed over Turkey like a heavy bulldozer. The US, saying "our boys did it," supported it. All political parties and the unions were shut down. More than 1.3 million people were registered as suspect by the security forces; 600,000 people were arrested. More than 400 people were tortured to death; ca. 230,000 were put on trial, hundreds of death sentences were given and 50 were hanged.

The military coup of 27 May 1960 is known as a "progressive" coup d'état. Thousands of people were arrested and three high ranking politicians were hanged, including the prime minister and the foreign minister of the country.

After the 12 March 1971 military coup, the Devrimci Gençlik Dernekleri Federasyonu , the most powerful leftist youth organization of the period, hung a very large banner on the wall of a university in Ankara and, proposing certain conditions, declared that if they were fulfilled, it would support the coup. .

This refers to the 12 September 1980 military coup.

He was arrested after the 12 September 1980 military coup. He remained in prison for nine years. His court case, despite the fact that 30 years have passed, is still continuing. The European Court of Human Rights condemned Turkey twice because of this case.

Dursun Akçam, teacher, active unionist, and writer. Before 12 September 1980, he was the owner of

the left-liberal newspaper Demokrat, and its editor in chief. The newspaper was outlawed by the 12 September coup, and its employees were arrested. My father lived in exile in Germany until 1991. He died on 19 September 2003.

Academic and lawyer, he was among the intellectuals arrested after the 12 March 1971 coup. He was a member of the Republican People's Party. He was murdered in 1990. It is claimed that he was killed for being a Kemalist by Islamist fanatics who wanted to establish a state run by sharia. It is very likely that he was murdered by structures like Ergenekon existing within the Turkish armed forces and trying to spread the image of a growing Islamic threat in Turkey.

In 1976, I was arrested because of some articles in the periodical Devrimci Gençlik, of which I was the chief editor. At this time, many of my father's friends agreed to become my lawyers in order to show their support.

He was the well-known editorial writer and editor in chief of the Kemalist Cumhuriyet newspaper. He played an important role in the attempts at a military coup of the young officers in 1970. He died on 21 June 1010 while being tried as a founder of the secret organization named Ergenekon within the army and bureaucracy.

This is a region in which a minority speaking the Kırmançı language and connected to the Alevi religion lives. Although most say they are Kurds, the Dersim people consider themselves as having different ethnic roots. They are also called Zaza. A very large scale massacre was organized in this region in 1937-8 and 30 thousand to 50 thousand people were annihilated. The decision for annihilation was taken by the government under the administration of Mustafa Kemal. The party in power in the government at the time was CHP, the Republican People's Party.

Prior to every general election, negotiations about seats in parliament take place between the CHP and organizations of the left in civil society, including the Alevis. The majority of the Alevis in particular support the CHP in exchange for obtaining several parliamentary representatives. Even if they knew that the CHP organized and defended the Dersim massacre, such behavior would not change.