

Arming Civilians with Ideology: Turning Party-Affiliated Civil Society Organisations to Repressive State Apparatuses

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Abstract: Political polarisation fuelled by hate speech and biased reporting, coupled with growing desensitisation to violence, is creating a worrying environment for oppositional voices against the government in Turkey. Already censored and silenced by Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) such as the judiciary and police, the opposition now faces the threat of extremist and violent party-affiliated civil society organisations. Through media analysis of interviews of certain political figures and news coverage of the 2013 Gezi protests and the 2015 coup attempt, this study aims to extend Althusser's concept of Repressive State Apparatuses and show that in the case of Turkey, the blurred lines between the government and the political leadership have led to the formation of ideologically motivated, unofficially government-backed and armed groups that threaten 'out-groups' through social ostracisation and violence.

Keywords: polarisation, party-affiliated civil society organisations (P-CSOs), repressive state apparatuses (RSAs), individual-armament, Gezi Protests, Coup Attempt

Introduction

Within the last 10 years, we are witnessing a concerning trend of polarisation within Turkish society. Besides issues such as nepotism and clientelism in public spaces, many are concerned about possible public backlash and ostracisation for expressing their political opinions, religious beliefs or ethnicities. Monopoly over news outlets allowed the leading party to spread its 'you are either with us, or a terrorist' narrative and created an alternative reality for its supporters.

The Gezi protests in 2013 and coup attempt provided significant opportunities for the leading party to imagine and re-define who is 'us' and who is 'them'. Through a media analysis of how these events were covered in mass media and interviews given by certain political and influential figures, I will explore how media was ideologically used to spread the 'us versus them' narrative and reinforced polarisation within society. The increased propaganda of paranoia and hate based on these events led to radicalisation of certain groups in support of the leading party, especially party-affiliated civil society organisations (P-CSOs). Reports and investigation proposals done by opposition parties and civil organisations raise concerns over individual armament and missing military weapons and their possible connections to paranoia and propaganda that has been targeting certain groups.

Through understanding the process of polarisation, alleged armament and threats of violence that is used by the ruling party and its radicalised groups to silence opposition, I aim to demonstrate how P-CSOs in Turkey are being used as a tool of repression by the state. Althusser's Repressive State Apparatuses does not include civil organisations as a repressive tool since they

are not directly connected to the state. They are usually used as an Ideological State Apparatus, to spread the ideology of the state. In Althusser's writing this ideology is capitalism, whereas I argue that in Turkey the ideology that is being spread by the government is Erdoganism and these civil organisations are not only ideological but also a repressive tool as they are acting as a judicial tool when judging who belongs to what group, socially and economically excluding people for their political positions. In a collectivist culture like Turkey, it is possible to see the power of social organisations and the serious consequences people suffer from being ostracised.

Party-Affiliated Civil Organisations as a Repressive State Apparatus

"It is necessary to pave the way for the issuance of licensed weapons to defend the right of the people to self-defence against those who attempted the coup" said Şeref Malkoç, then Senior Counsellor of the Presidency, on the state-owned news channel, just a few days after the 15 July Coup Attempt in Turkey. According to data from the Ministry of Interior Affairs, individual armament increased by 10 percent in just three months after the coup attempt. This trend of rising civilian gun ownership continued over the years. For the last six years, news has been filled with gun violence and social media flooded with gun pictures with captions threatening people. According to interviews conducted by the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) in 2020, 78.4% of the interviewees did not feel safe and fear being attacked (RTÜK 2020, 86). While the fear among people increased, desensitisation to violence also rose with the media and politicians playing a crucial role in this. Fear is established to spread and preserve the ruling ideology of Erdoganism.

The political and economic shift in Turkey after Erdoğan's election was accompanied by certain reforms to establish the hegemony of the new ruling class and ideology. Drawing on Althusser's essay on 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', the goal of this paper is to demonstrate how both Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses are used to ensure hegemony and oppression through a reproduction of the idea of 'victimhood.' Althusser uses the concept of these two apparatuses to explain how capitalism is reproduced through the state to protect the interest of the ruling class and bourgeoisie. The same tools have been used in Turkey through the neoliberal approach/political programme of Erdoğan. However, Erdoganism is not limited to neoliberalisation. According to Yilmaz and Bashirov (2018), Erdoganism combines elements of "electoral authoritarianism", "neopatrimonialism²", "populism", "Islamism" as well as "neo-Ottomanism" (Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018, 1813). The ideology of Erdoganism emerged as a counterpart/in opposition to the Kemalist ideology. Erdoğan became the representative of people who were oppressed by the Kemalist ideology. This self-understanding as victims of Kemalism became the fuel of the ideology and justified the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government to become the 'oppressor of the oppressor.' Paired with nepotism and clientelism, AKP consolidated its power within the state. Now, the majority of the top-level positions in the bureaucracy, justice system and in each layer of the state are occupied by AKP party members.

Louis Althusser argues that the state, controlled by the capitalist class, is composed of infrastructure and superstructure that produce and reproduce state ideology. While infrastructure comprises its economic base, the superstructure constitutes repressive and ideological apparatuses. Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) consist of bodies such as the police, army and courts that function through repression and the use of or threat of violence. Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) involve communication centres, education and religious-based institutions. Since coming to power, the AKP regime successfully used both to spread its ideology and preserve its position

by polarising Turkish society. Outside of the state, AKP has both formal and informal networks with an estimated 10 million members and hundreds of associations and foundations (Irak and Öztürk 2017, 440). Some are political party organisations, and many have connections to religious and business groups that are benefiting from the Erdoganism of the ruling party. This network is both used to spread the ideology of the ruling class and repress oppositional voices in public and private spaces.

This network includes cult-like fanatic groups that declared loyalty to their ‘Leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’. These fanatic groups are occasionally used by Erdoğan’s government and government affiliated private companies to repress any attempts of protest and boycott. Through social and economic strain, these party-affiliated civil society organisations (P-CSOs), pressure groups targeted by their leaders. P-CSOs also play an influential role in the recruiting and political mobilisation of civilians. In terms of their functions, these organisations can fit the role of both ISAs and RSAs. Even though P-CSOs are not a part of systemic violence like RSAs, power lynching, threats of defamation, social ostracisation and economic violence like layoffs by these organisations cannot be dismissed or diminished, as the collectivist culture of Turkey allows them to have an overwhelming impact in dictating people’s lifestyles, world views, as well as opinions.

The AKP government successfully paired their ideology with two crucial historic events that occurred under its rule to polarise the Turkish public and target political and civil threats to its hegemony. Both the mainstream media and social media played a crucial role in this through biased news coverage and interviews, as well as overexposing the public to hate speech and violence through soap operas and reality shows. The fears for safety and desensitisation to acts of violence created by the media were supported with threats and violent actions of radicalised pro-government P-CSOs, as well as individual-armament through alleged state support. By looking at the use of media by the AKP government, this paper aims to show how P-CSOs began to be used as ideological and repressive state apparatuses.

Ideological use of Media

For a regular Turkish family, it is habitual to watch the 19 o’clock news during dinner and the soap opera airing afterwards, at the end of a working day. According to the Radio and Television Supreme Council’s (RTUK) ‘Television Watching Habits Survey’ from 2008, the average time of daily television watching in Turkey was 3 hours and 34 minutes (KONDA 2019, 20). This increased to 4 hours 33 minutes by 2020, which may have been caused by the Coronavirus pandemic. Despite the rise of social media and online streaming platforms, television has maintained its influential role in Turkish society, and not only for entertainment but also for newscasting.

According to a recent report by KONDA, a research and consultancy company, 72 Turkish society gets their news through television (KONDA 2021). When we look at the list of the most viewed channels, we find that ten out of the thirteen main channels are closely associated with the Erdoğan government and his family businesses (KONDA 2019, 13). The same survey shows that viewers of these news channels tend not to do further online research on the news they hear, and are generally associated with conservative political parties. In another survey from 2018, KONDA discovered that the majority of AKP electors follow news from ATV, A Haber and the state-owned network Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) (Uncu 2018, 24-25). Both ATV and A Haber are owned by Erdoğan’s son-in-law’s brother, Serhat Albayrak as part of Turkuvaz Media Group. Both channels are accused of spreading pro-government propaganda and false in-

formation on social and economic problems, and using divisive language, by the opposition. The remaining three broadcast networks, which are not pro-government, are closely surveilled by the government's regulatory body of RTUK.

The regulatory body, RTUK, has the authority to penalise, censor and remove TV programmes as well as TV channels. This provides great leverage to the ruling party as the head of the RTUK council was appointed by Erdoğan. The appointee was Ebubekir Şahin, who, in the past, declared that he was a close follower of AKP and its political Islamist agenda. To serve Erdoğan's agenda, RTUK has been effectively used in penalising and censoring channels and content criticising the AKP government (Sansür ve Otosansüre Karşı Platform, 2021). Concerned with censoring scenes of intimacy, cigarettes, and alcohol, that have been on the Islamist agenda, RTUK neglected the censoring of scenes of gun violence, rape, and violence towards women, children, and animals. This prevented people from having any chance to escape the already violent and negative news cycles that are abundantly filled with femicides, abuse, and violence. According to Erhan Kaya and Mikail Ozdemir's research based on 28 Turkish prime-time TV shows broadcasted from November to December 2019, 72.6% of released episodes show weapons, 98.8% show verbal violence, 97.6% show physical violence and 98.8% show psychological violence and 7.1% include content with sexual violence (Ozdemir and Kaya 2020, 353). Constant media exposure to violence eventually spilled over to real life with people beginning to show their intolerance and desensitisation to violence (Yenilmez and Demir 2016, 19). Couples kissing, hugging, and even holding hands are subjected to violence from bypassers on the street, while acts of violence against women and animals as well as fights are ignored.

Althusser argues that the media is one of the Ideological State Apparatuses. In Turkey's case, the media can be seen as more powerful than any other apparatus, such as education and family, since the majority of AKP electors' education is limited to elementary (39.0%) and high school (32.1%) (Toplumsal Tepki Arastirma Merkezi 2020, 15). Throughout its history, Turkey was unable to establish a stable education system. Each military coup and each government change brought about changes in the education system such as changes in exam systems, curriculum and overall school structures, resulting in a low quality of education. This tends to create populations that lack critical thinking and research skills which makes them vulnerable to manipulation. The lack of education allows the media to have immense influence over people's personalities, identities, ideas, and ideologies. Due to its accessibility, the media can be used to both educate and emotionally manipulate through false and exaggerated narratives.

The media plays the central role in creating an 'us vs them' narrative. Through divisive narratives, imagined enemies, and fake news, the ruling government successfully united its supporter base against opposing ideologies and identities. Polarisation creates imagined ideological communities in Turkey that help determine who is the 'other' that should be subjected to violence. In the beginning of Erdoğan's rule, the 'other' was the Turkish army and secularist parties who oppressed religious freedom under the Kemalist hegemony. Even though Erdoğan occasionally continued to target influential secularist individuals, the Gezi protests in 2013 gave him the opportunity to target whoever did not support his rule.

Creating 'enemy': Gezi Park protests

On March 30, 2013, hundreds flooded Gezi Park after the police's violent response to peaceful environmental activists protesting against the demolition of Gezi Park. The use of force led the

protests to turn into an anti-governmental one that brought up issues ranging from ecology, to the economy and political Islamist intervention in social life. The majority of the protestors joined because they felt their freedom had been restricted under the AKP government (KONDA 2013, 10). While government-controlled media and political figures targeted protestors as "traitors to the nation" who were employed by "foreign forces", KONDA's survey found that half of the protestors at the park were not associated with any political party or any non-governmental organisation (KONDA 2013, 13-14). The protests allowed the AKP government to construct a narrative of a 'real nation' of regime supporters, and 'others' who oppose the regime both politically and ideologically.

The initial response of the government-led media to the protests was to ignore them. Three main news channels chose not to broadcast the protests and one of them even put on a penguin documentary which later became the symbol of the protests. The lack of mainstream coverage led Twitter to become the main medium to organise and mobilise people as well as to share information. The decentralisation of media through social media and citizen journalism became the heart of the protests. Twitter was taken over by pictures and videos of police violence that were censored or dismissed by the mainstream media. "Now we have a menace that is called Twitter... to me, social media is the worst menace to society". said Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Prime Minister at the time (Erdoğan 2013). His remarks were followed by several attempts to restrict access to Twitter. However, the use of Virtual Private Networks (VPN) allowed protestors to bypass restrictions to render these attempts useless, and this led AKP to employ 6,000 AK trolls on Twitter (Stanford Internet Observatory et al. 2020, 3), who would make the government and their supporters' presence heard on this opposition-dominated platform (Irak and Öztürk 2018, 441). Within a month, many ministers and AKP officials joined and began actively posting on Twitter (Irak and Öztürk 2018, 447).

As the protests got bigger and spread across the country, the mainstream media had no option but to cover it. The majority of the coverage portrayed the protestors as 'vagabonds,' 'traitors,' and 'hired agents of Western force'. In order to spark outrage, many false stories designed to appeal to people's religious, national, and conservative values were released. Some of the stories were: "They (protestors) drank alcohol in Dolmabahçe Mosque"; "They burnt the Turkish flag..."; and "They assaulted women wearing headscarves..." (Sözcü 2016, 1). When asked about the protests at a press conference, Erdoğan answered that he was struggling to keep "50% [of the electorate who voted for him] in their homes" from reclaiming the streets that are occupied by 'others' who were, allegedly, supported by foreign forces (Milliyet, 2013). With the negative media coverage and encouragement of civil intervention to the protests, Erdoğan, for the first time, used his supporter base as a threat of repressive force against the opposition. A few days after the conference, groups armed with machetes, knives, and bats began attacking protestors across the country. Some were seen acting with the police forces on the ground. On June 6th, Ali İsmail Korkmaz, a 19-year-old university student, was battered by police and opposing groups, resulting in a 38 day-long coma and him subsequently passing away from brain haemorrhage.

After three weeks, the protests ended due to increased violence and police forces taking over the occupied zones. In the following weeks, Gezi park remained closed for landscape re-arrangements. Even though protestors did not achieve their demands, Gezi was a way of saying 'we exist' for people silenced by the repressive Erdoğan regime. This construction of 'we' affirmed the 'other' and gave a characteristic to these ideologies and identities. Statements of government officials, biased media coverage of the protests and the 'Respect for National Will Rallies' held by Erdoğan influenced public opinion on the motives of the protests and who the protestors were. A survey

done by KONDA suggests that 30.5% viewed protestors as “traitors to the nation”, “members of marginal groups”, and “agents of foreign forces”, 73% of the 22.4% that suggest protestors were motivated by anti-AKP sentiments and believed that it was a ‘plot against Turkey;’. Only 30.6% saw the protesters as people fighting for their rights (KONDA 2014, 68-67).

Now more aware of the potential of social media in organising and mobilising masses, the AKP government began arresting and suing civilians for their social media posts. To this day, AKP trolls play a crucial role in monitoring social media through spamming and reporting oppositional accounts, creating spam hashtags to divert attention or creating false public opinion posts. Four years after the protests, in 2017, around six individuals each week were arrested for their social media posts (Wilson and Hahn 2021, 472). According to the 2020 report from the Ministry of Justice, since 2014 the number of cases opened on charges of insulting Erdoğan on social media has reached 160,690 (Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Justice 2020).

The Erdoğan government’s use of RSAs through the constant presence of police in public spaces, the creation of new divisions of surveillance and policing institutions and the threat of judicial action against opposing views, helped silence civilians in public spaces. The role of silencing others in private spaces, like in family, neighbourhood, and friend gatherings was done through social exclusion conducted by civilians members of pro-government P-CSO. Both RSAs and P-CSOs were employed to censor oppositional voices online and offline. After the coup attempt, P-CSOs were used for witch hunts within their communities.

Coup Attempt

On Friday July 15, 2016, around 2,200 soldiers closed off the Bosphorus Bridge (now called July 15 Martyrs’ Bridge) that connects Istanbul’s European side to the Anatolian. An hour later, fighter jets were spotted flying over Istanbul and the capital city of Ankara. Soon after, the Prime Minister at the time, Binali Yıldırım, confirmed that there was a coup happening.

Turkey has a rich history of coup d’etats, yet that was the first time a coup was being broadcast on television. In the previous coups, taking over and limiting services of telecommunication systems including the public broadcasting channel TRT, were crucial steps for putschists. However, today, with the privatisation of the entertainment industry, TRT is no longer the primary news source, and the internet plays the central role in telecommunication. In line with tradition, coup plotters read their Kemalist sounding manifesto on TRT. Meanwhile, CNN Turk broadcasted President Erdoğan’s live FaceTime call appealing the “nation” to “go on to the streets and give [the putschist army] their answer”. This call resulted in people flooding the streets and clashing with military members. However, this appearance of Erdoğan led to scepticism on the legitimacy of the coup among some. Familiar with the previous coups, some began to question the plot. No government officials or governmental institutions including telecommunication services were captured prior to the declaration of the coup as ‘successful’. Scepticism and already existing distrust in the government and the ruling party officials once again highlighted the political fragmentation in the public; people who protect the ‘national will’, a majority of whom were, supporters of the ruling party and the nationalist party, Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP), versus ‘traitors to nation and national will’. According to KONDA, while 54% of Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP) - the main opposition party - supporters believed it was either staged or allowed by the Erdoğan regime (Doğan 2018 44), 92% of AKP supporters believed it was a real attempt that was stopped

by the "national will" (Uncu 2018, 37).

Contrary to the alleged connections between the AKP and the mobs at Gezi park, during the coup attempt there was a clear link between the ruling party and the groups going out on streets to 'guard [the] national will'. Once again Erdoğan successfully mobilised his supporter base and "patriots" to risk their own lives in clashing with the army, through appealing to their nationalistic feelings. This resulted in a discrediting of the army and its reframing as a threat to national independence and national will, similar to the protestors in Gezi.

After the capture of the coup plotters, the coup was deemed unsuccessful. With this announcement, resistance in the streets turned into celebrations of 'democracy' and 'national will.' The victory was repeatedly dedicated by state officials to the civilians who resisted in the streets, and many were given veteran status. Erdoğan began rallying across the country to hold National Will Assemblies and encouraged "democracy watches" against any future threats. During his rallies, Erdoğan occasionally brought up the Gezi protests, associating the protesters with the elite who looked down on 'the real people,' just like the coup plotters. In Erzurum, he stated, "I don't recognize any will higher than my nation's will. They [protestors] will first learn how to respect the national will". After three years, the Gezi protests were again on the news. At his appearance at the Ensar Foundation General Assembly, Erdoğan said, "those who came out on that night [July 15] were not the youth of Gezi park. They were young people who loved their homeland, who loved their nation" (Erdoğan 2016). The AKP government created a narrative of inner threat by drawing parallels between the Gezi protests and the coup attempt. Both were perpetrated by foreign forces through 'inner allies', like the Fethullah Terrorist Organisation, and anyone who stood against these 'divisive' traitorous acts, the Gezi protests and the coup attempt, formed the real nation.

Following the coup attempt, the government underwent certain structural changes. The independent General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces was attached to the Ministry of National Defence, putting the army under the direct control of the President of Turkey. In addition, the Gendarmerie General Command became affiliated with the Interior Ministry. These changes got rid of the possibility of any coup attempts and gave full control over any military organisation to the ruling government. Meanwhile a witch hunt began within the country. "Where were you on July 15?" was the headline of pro-government newspapers, and anyone who was seen at markets or ATM lines on the night of the coup were accused of treason as they did not join the resistance. This witch hunt targeted the sceptics of the coup, and anyone affiliated with Fetullah Gulen, a religious leader, and his Gulen Movement. For their affiliations, thousands of civil servants, judges, and government officials who were appointed or allowed in governmental institutions by the 'fooled' ruling party, were removed from their positions and many were convicted for treason.

With a new name in their ideological agenda, after the coup attempt Erdoğan called on his supporters to do their "patriotic duty" and asked them to take on responsibility by reporting Gulen Movement members to the government. According to Erdoğan, the division of labour was "you will find them, and we will investigate, examine them and do what is necessary within the law". This call encouraged his supporters, especially P-CSOs, to actively participate in the judicial system and police their communities. Civilians became informants and began spying on their neighbours, co-workers and relatives who may be associated with the Gulenist Movement, now referred to as Fethullah Gulen Terror Orgutu (FETO) (Perry et al. 2020, 199). The growing hate speech against the movement by politicians and the media resulted in paranoia and an atmosphere of fear of being affiliated with the Gulenist Movement. This led to the social exclusion of families

or family members that were once part of the Gulenist Movement and, in some cases, physical violence and verbal assaults (Perry et al. 2020, 204). Alongside civilians, many well organised P-CSOs, have been active in listing members of the movement and reporting them to police in the name of “cleaning” (Yıldız, 2019).

Arming Ideology through Individual Armament

According to the ruling party members, pro-government elite and P-CSOs, the coup attempt revealed the seriousness of the internal threat to democracy and national will that first appeared during the Gezi protests. The Erdoğan government used communication ISA to give his supporters their “daily doses of nationalism, chauvinism, liberalism and moralism” to inject paranoia and to keep them on their toes against any possible threat coming from outside and by inner enemies living amongst them (Althusser 1970, 12). State-sponsored commercials, TV series, documentaries, and movies about coup attempts flooded Turkish mainstream media. Non-governmental but pro-government media outlets played a crucial role in this as well, by providing platforms for divisive and violent comments. Discussion programmes and interviews of pro-government activists, businessmen and politicians who openly engaged in hate speech against ‘others’ accompanied the state propaganda.

A year after the coup attempt, the Minister of Interior Affairs, Süleyman Soyulu, in an interview on Habertürk TV stated, “on July 15th, we could not do what we wanted to do. I do not know if they will give us that opportunity, I mean, if they try something like this again, we will have that opportunity, that is clear” (Soyulu 2017). A similar statement was given by activist and writer, Sevda Noyan in 2020, on another pro-government channel. Noyan said, “July 15th was a failure, we could not do what we wanted, we were caught off guard... To be clear, our family can take down 50 people. We are very well equipped financially and morally. We stand by our leader, and we will never let him be defeated in this country, let me tell you that. They should watch their step. There are still 3-5 in our neighbourhood, my list is ready” (Noyan 2020). In both statements there are mentions of not having the opportunity to do what they ‘wanted to do’. There are no clear explanations of what they desired to do. However, from the following claims it can be assumed that there is a desire to exert violence against those who attempted to take down the government. In Noyan’s statement there are clear threats of violence. She also refers to a leader who is assumed to be President Erdoğan, since he was given the title Commander in Chief by his supporters and party members after the coup attempt.

Noyan is not the first to refer to Erdoğan as ‘the leader’. In 2017, the organisation Kardeş Kal Türkiye (Stay As Brothers Turkey), was founded by President Tayyip Erdoğan’s in-law, Orhan Uzuner. According to the organisation’s ‘Who are we?’ section on their website, it was established “to protect Turkey from any future coup attempts and [to] be ready for a possible civil war” (Kardeş Kal Türkiye 2017). There are allegations of the group leader openly encouraging individual armament. According to some reports, in their first meeting in January 2017, Uzuner said, “we are united around our leader and the symbol of freedom, President Tayyip Erdoğan. We don’t want him to suffer any harm. Our smallest device is a whistle. I have a megaphone in my car. We have weapons to use when we need them. We need to make these kinds of preparations” (Tartanoğlu 2017).

The paranoia of a continuing internal threat to democracy and the slogan that “we need to be ready for it” continued to be spread by pro-government channels. Consequently, individual

armament in Turkey has become a serious issue in the following years after the 15 July coup attempt. Already ideologically divided, Turkey is now suffering from a concerning percentage of its population arming itself against another 'treason'. According to data provided by the Ministry of Interior Affairs, within three months after the coup attempt individual armament rose by 10 % (Birgun 2017), and by the end of 2017 crimes involving guns increased by 61 % (Umut Vakfi 2018). The occasional hate speech and false accusations from politicians against the opposition and their supporters cause constant suspense and tension between the polarised groups. The founder of the Umut Foundation against individual armament warned against hate speech and mentioned it as the primary factor in the armament of civilians (Deutsche Welle 2020).

Motivated by fear, hate, and nationalism, many are turning to individual armament. Concerned about the increased gun violence, the opposition party made an investigation proposal to look into individual armament and gun sales. However, it was rejected with the votes of AKP and MHP members in the parliament. This rejection of the investigation can be considered as proof of the politicisation of individual armament. While individual armament is increasing through the purchase of weapons, new allegations about missing military weapons and their alleged distribution to P-CSOs are brought to the public's attention by Sedat Peker, a notorious mafia leader who used to work closely with the AKP government. The possibility of the ruling party arming ideologically driven P-CSOs shows us how fanaticized civilians can be turned into a militia that oppresses others.

Missing Military Weapons

Following the disappearance of military arms and the alleged distribution of them to members of P-CSOs, the leading opposition party prepared a report on the issue and proposed an investigation of the issue on January 23, 2019. According to the report presented in 2013, there were more than 76,000 weapons reported missing, and in 2014 this number had reduced to 14,000 (Kasap 2021). This brought up suspicions about whether these weapons were distributed to certain groups during the Gezi protest, and then recollected in the following year. Similarly, from 2015 to 2017 the number of missing weapons increased by 90,000 which led to speculations on the whereabouts of these weapons and if they were distributed, again, in 2016 during or after the coup attempt (Kasap 2021). Just like the investigation proposal on individual armament, this proposal was rejected with the votes of AKP and MHP members of parliament, and lost its media attention until the confessions of the nationalist mafia leader, Sedat Peker (SoL Haber 2018).

After the allyship between Peker and the AKP government fell apart, Peker began releasing YouTube videos and Twitter threads on illegal businesses they conducted together. These confessions include money laundering, corruption, assassinations, and arming civilians. In his Twitter thread from July 8, 2021, Sedat Peker revived the controversies over the lost military weapons. In his thread, he accuses the Minister of Internal Affairs, Soyulu, of distributing unregistered weapons on the night of the coup attempt. He further alleges that a month after the coup attempt, during the nationwide democracy watches, AKP Istanbul Youth Branch Vice President Osman Tomakin received a case of Kalashnikovs from a local AKP Youth Branch and Ahmet Onay, an employee of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Peker 2021). Onay confirmed that he was in the car and met with Tomakin. However, he said he did not know what was stowed in the trunk (Deutsche Welle 2021).

Oppositional leaders, journalists, as well as civilians were already suffering from spammers, lawsuits and death threats for their social media posts and released statements. The allegations of armament caused concern which led to self-censorship, shutting down social media accounts and pacifying opposition. Tweets shared by various members of AKP Youth Branches which contained pictures of weapons with captions of threats against opposition leaders or protesters justified the concerns of the opposition. One example read, “tell us to shoot and we shoot, tell us to die and we die. The streets are not abandoned. Your command is enough”. It was shared by Düzce AKP Youth Branch Board Member, Mehmet Aybek on Facebook with a picture of him holding a MP5 machine gun (Bianet 2017). Another example is the tweet shared by AKP Youth Branch ex-Chairman, İsmail Karaosmanoğlu that reads, “until the July 15th treacherous attempt, I only had a few pocket knives for hobby purposes. Now I have enough weapons and ammunition to equip a squad. There are hundreds of thousands like me. If anyone ever intends to change the government in any other way again, we have many fantasies to try” (Karaosmanoğlu 2020).

Too Afraid to Go Out on the Streets and Protest

Years of hate speech, propaganda and paranoia infused in political speeches, TV shows and news coverages created a clear ideological and political division within Turkish society. Any protests and public demonstrations against the regime are met with police violence, social exclusion, social media spamming and threats. The paranoia of pro-government civilians was mirrored by the opposition. An example of self-censorship and the fear of violence from pro-government groups is evidenced by the economy protests of November 2021.

In recent years, there has been a crucial devaluation of the Turkish lira and an increase in inflation which affects the Turkish people every day. On November 23, 2021, the conversion rate from Turkish Lira to US Dollars increased to around 12.60. This immediate increase from 11.51 caused outrage among the public. While some shared their frustration online, some took the streets to protest the failing economic policies of the government and asked for the resignation of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Yet, the majority chose not to join due to fears of an escalation in violence which was not an unreasonable worry after Sedat Peker’s Twitter thread following the attack on the headquarters of the Kurdish, People’s Democratic Party. Sedat Peker warned people not to take to the streets because there was a “big game being staged” and if people decided to protest, it would allow pro-government actors to “set everything on fire” (Peker 2021). Despite the fact that living standards and the economy continued to decline following the economy protests, people still reminded themselves of the words of Peker. Most recently, on June 1, 2022, after Erdoğan called Gezi protestors “whores” on live television (Altan 2022), the hashtag “#sokağaçıkmayacağız” (we won’t go out on the streets) quoting Peker’s tweet from 2021 became a trending topic on Twitter to try to prevent any public reaction to the insulting statement.

The economy protests were not as big as the Gezi protests due to fear of a possible outbreak of violence and the provocation of regime supporters. Regardless of that, protesters were targeted by Abdulkadir Selvi, a writer in the *Hurriyet* newspaper, known for his close relations with the Erdoğan government. He compared the economy protests to the Gezi protests even though they had no connection to one another. In his article, he questioned if “there is a second Gezi protest planned” by foreign forces. Bringing up the Gezi protests debate, he went on to question motives of the protesters and argued it was a coup attempt just like that of July 15. The portrayal of Gezi protesters as traitors in the media continues until today. Just a few days before the 9th anniversary of the Gezi protests, Ihlas New Agency released a short documentary called *Gezi*

Kalkışması (Gezi Uprising). The documentary was produced to paint protesters as opponents of democracy by defining the protests as a "so-called resistance, it was a revolt, a rebellion, a clear uprising against the elected government. The people wanted to be mobilised, and according to the hidden hands, Turkey would be the loser" (Ihlas News Agency 2022).

‘Successful’ Use of Propaganda and RSAs

The opposition in Turkey constantly feels under threat. Even on social media, there are many occasions people self-censor by cutting short their criticism of the government by saying "... anyways it must be cold in Silivri (a prison for political prisoners) now". But the fear of the opposition is not limited to self-censoring. Whenever there are talks about protesting, there is expressed fear of violence from police and pro-government groups. The armed and ideologically connected governmental support base suppresses opposing voices by displaying their weapons or threatening to use violence. That is why I refer to this armed support base as a Repressive State Apparatus. They are products and protectors of the state ideology imposed by the Erdoğan government and see the President as their ideological leader.

With the inflation rate reaching 85.51% (Dierks 2022), and unemployment soaring, Erdoğan's government relies on the ideological division they have created over the years to stay in power. This is why associating Gezi protests with coup plotters and foreign forces increased this year as the elections in 2023 neared. Regardless of the party relations or ideological proximity, today those who criticise the regime for its failing economic policies are declared traitors and agents of foreign forces by the government, pro-government channels, and radicalised supporters. Through this, the ruling party is creating factions within its supporter base and narrowing its base down to an ideologically radicalised one. Even though Althusser defined civil societal organisations as an ideological state apparatus and not a repressive one, in this specific example of Turkey and its current climate, we see them being used to police, judge and punish any danger to the hegemonic ideology.

Conclusion

Looking at the last 20 years of Turkey, it is possible to see how the Erdoğan government has used Ideological State Apparatuses to create a supporter base that reproduces his ideologies. The supporter base formed through the use of ISAs, the divisive language of the government and the media, began to identify with the ideology. The imposed paranoia and exposure to violence desensitised the population to violence and even turned them into perpetrators. And the coup attempt allowed for the radicalisation of the supporter base by constantly reminding them that the assault on the government was also an attack on their national, religious and moral values. Changes in the state structure such as switching to the presidential system and new laws, as well as Erdoğanist ideology that allows for nepotism and clientelism, means the division between the state and ruling party structures are blurred. Leading party affiliated groups benefiting from their proximity to state also make it difficult to differentiate them from other state structures. It is concerning to see how the radicalisation followed by individual armament and government-provided weapons led to the creation of a violent militia that declares loyalty to Erdoğan and are oppressive of oppositional voices using violence and threats of violence through the posts they share on social media.

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Notes

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²Neopatrimonialism is a system of social hierarchy where patrons use state resources to secure the loyalty of clients in the general population. It is an informal patron–client relationship that can reach from very high up in state structures down to individuals in small villages.

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