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How to Achieve Transnational Solidarity in the Age of Neoliberal Authoritarianism and Border Securitization?

"We'll come united - Demonstration/Parade Hamburg 29.09.2018" Source: Flickr photo by Rasande Tyskar

In this essay, I want to address the complications stemming from the political economy of transnational solidarity networks and the power asymmetry in them, mainly through discussing the Turkish case. Neoliberal globalization and its political geography built upon colonial divisions have become the framework for cross-national solidarity as well as the recent authoritarian turn, while at the same time bringing in structural setbacks to the former. Furthermore, the recent migration "crises", that are caused by imperialist interventions, have been met with heightened border securitization in the Global North, limiting the field for international human rights activism. This introduces a serious additional challenge to the conception and practice of transnational solidarity.

Transnational Support for Civil Society in Turkey

The question I posed in the title comes from my personal experience as a member of BİRARADA, a civil society organization (CSO) in Turkey, which aims to defend academic freedoms, and the research project that I am conducting as a sociologist, on authoritarianism and on rights-based CSOs in my country—CSOs that have to finance themselves with external funding to a large extent, and mainly through the European Union human rights and democracy promotion framework. In the absence of public funding options, which is a widespread trait in the Global South, external funding emerges as the leading viable option for financing civil society activism in Turkey. However, external funding emerges as a problem from two angles, as

it can lead to financial dependency and the questioning of the autonomy of the recipient organizations by their domestic publics.

In addition to funding, political leverage via external support is important for the social movements and CSOs under authoritarian regimes that try to suppress demands for democracy and equality. In the Turkish case, this has been the now-fallen expectation advanced mostly by liberal leftists that the EU—which Turkey has been a candidate of for two decades and has crucial trading and socio-political ties with—would be a democratizing influence over the government.

The current state of affairs, following the Syrian Civil War and more recently the withdrawal of the NATO forces from Afghanistan, brings with it the primacy of border security and prevention of migration agendas, curtailing human rights principles and the supposedly norm-based approach in EU foreign politics. This situation debilitates transnational solidarity for counter-authoritarian politics in Turkey and many other similar contexts, revealing the limits of state-centred and institutional frameworks in cross-national support for social movements.

Neoliberalism Breeding Authoritarianism

The contemporary surge of authoritarian regimes is traced back to the contradictions of neoliberalism and the global financial crisis of 2008–9 which aggravated income disparity and socio-economic uncertainties, and normalized coercive and non-democratic state practices to ensure the continuation of neoliberal policies.[1] However, long before the crisis, the introduction of neoliberalism in the Global South involved military coups as in Chile (1974) and Turkey (1980), as well as other violent and extra-legal policies to suppress labour movements, intensify extraction and exploitation, and restrict civil society.[2]

The Turkish case is exemplary whereby the government of Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party, AKP) spearheaded the country's neoliberal transformation along with its authoritarian turn. The AKP came to power in 2002 and its policies merged political Islam with first a free-market agenda and then an illiberal economic governance, both deepening income inequality and exploitation. Until the early 2010s, the AKP was endorsed by the liberal global powers including the EU and the US for "democratizing" the country, together with integrating the Turkish economy into the world market, mainly through the privatization of public assets and initiatives, and increased financialization.

Yet, since its early times, the AKP has relied heavily on governmental decrees and omnibus bills that overrode parliamentary processes and democratic deliberation for changes spanning from accelerated privatization, the weakening of labour rights, and increasing political control over

the judiciary.[3] In this way, the neoliberal transformation brought the corruption of democracy and paved the way for the entrenchment of the AKP's authoritarian rule.

Shrinking Civic Space as the Global Northern Borders are Secured

Including the Turkish case, the surge of authoritarian regimes have resulted in a trend of shrinking space for civil society as states increase control over CSOs to reduce their critical voices and restrict their access to international support and justice mechanisms. This happens mainly through criminalizing the foreign funding relations through evoking anti-western and nationalist sentiments.

The crackdowns on civil society are usually treated as isolated phenomena explained away as being the authoritarian and reactionary tendencies of domestic political forces. However, a transnational perspective should be deployed to understand the global shrinking of civic space, and that considers the framework of foreign interests and global power relations.[4] These involve factors like the repression of organized labour in line with the measures imposed by international institutions like the IMF and the World Bank, and growing securitization and anti-terrorism politics.

In recent years, the multipolarity in world politics, meaning the overt power struggle between the Western powers, China, and Russia, inflames proxy wars as in Syria, causing appalling humanitarian crises and massive waves of migration. This situation prompts heightened security concerns and the migration control agenda on the part of the Global North states. Regarding Turkey, this results in the EU's cooperation with the AKP government, which materialized in the refugee deal signed in 2016, for its containment of the millions of Syrian refugees in Turkey and now the possible keeping Afghan refugees outside European borders. The 2016 refugee deal has been strongly criticized for disregarding human rights principles, even contradicting the EU's own Convention of Human Rights.

As Turkey assumes the role of the EU's border post, its status as a candidate country and the ensuing expectations—to fulfil criteria based around democracy and human rights—all withered away. The relationship between Turkey and the EU has taken on a pragmatic and transactional character revolving around the EU's focus on the question of migration prevention, while the Turkish government uses the migrants as a bargaining chip in foreign relations. For this reason, the EU tends to overlook the authoritarian practices in Turkey, despite the castigating statements by its representatives which do not put any real pressure on the government.[5]

TANs and Power Asymmetry in Solidarity Networks

The concept of a "transnational advocacy network" (TAN), introduced by Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, has been influential in the literature examining cross-national efforts of solidarity. The authors describe TANs as being made up of "those relevant actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services".[6] The goal of TANs is to create a boomerang pattern whereby transnational support provides leverage to social movements in countries where states do not respond to domestic demands for democracy and equality.

However, the boomerang pattern casts doubt on the idea of shared values and comradeship within TANs as the networks involve an uneven relationship which has an affinity with the colonial power asymmetry. This is between the providers of financial and political assistance—who are based in the Global North and metropolitan areas—and the clients of the system, located in the Global South and peripheral contexts, who have to compete for such support.

Critics point out the problems—emanating from the unequal political geography inherent in the idea and practice of TANs—that put the social movements and CSOs in the Global South seeking transnational support at a disadvantage. There are several complications identified within TANs, including but not limited to dependency on foreign funding, professionalization and technicalization that potentially alienates activism from grassroots politics, and agenda-setting and gatekeeping by the northern actors in determining the subjects and actors of activism.[7]

In connection with these, it is argued that TANs display a market-like constitution operating through a colonialist division of labour.[8] Thereby, political causes and suffering in southern contexts are chosen then turned into commodities as they are framed with reference to the values upheld by the northern donors, such as support for minority rights, which sometimes fall short of covering the complexities of the afflictions in question. Southern civil society actors are expected to specialize as brokers of suffering in the northern human rights markets, while mastering the language and technical knowledge for pitching their causes to receive support.

This market structure is organized in accordance with neoliberal logic and a project-based framework. The dominant modality in which activism has to be produced in TANs is the project form to meet the donors' expectations of accountability and efficiency, which usually describes the outcomes of activism in quantifiable terms. The project-based format is omnipresent, guiding many aspects of human practice in our current neoliberal times, and characterized by the centrality of activity instead of the context, utilitarian networks instead of durable connections, and the treatment of society as isolated functions instead of a web of intertwined institutions.[9]

Projectification of activism dictates the flexibility of operations, limited time frames, and a fragmented approach to social relations which fits with the neoliberal logic of production. This brings acute problems to the activist endeavours established within TANs as they tend to be short-term and project-oriented, and therefore hard to continue and evolve. It is paradoxical that most times transnational assistance programmes identify the problem of lack of "sustainability"—the ideal ability of initiatives to run by their own means—as a core issue to be addressed. Yet, they simultaneously produce the problem through short-term grants and the imposition of isolated goals for the projects.

Decolonizing and De-Neoliberalizing Transnational Solidarity

Clearly, the power asymmetry reproducing colonial patterns and the neoliberal market-like structure and commodification of activism within TANs impair the solidarist ethos that activists from difficult contexts hope to find some comfort in. I suggest some shifts to make this system more egalitarian and responsible, which rest on problematizing the transnational political economy within which solidarity networks function.

As for encountering projectification and the so-called "sustainability" issues, a renewed perspective is required that prioritizes the long-term development of ties and involves a comprehensive understanding of the multi-faceted political problems within the contexts to be supported. This necessitates finding ways to challenge or strategically bargain with the neoliberal logic of the economic relationship, whereby most solidarity donors in the Global North are dependent on public funds managed by state authorities. Hence, seeking financial autonomy for the actors within transnational solidarity networks should be kept as a core agenda item.

Another critical matter is re-defining accountability as a two-way relationship norm, whereas in TANs, it usually refers to the recipient's responsibility to realize transformative operations in the southern and local contexts in exchange for the financial and political support they receive. I argue that this relationship has to be firmly established as mutual, whereby the providers in the Global North should be kept accountable for influencing states and international mechanisms to act in change-bringing ways in authoritarian contexts.

In the Turkish case, this is an emotive issue regarding TANs. Even though the EU government deploys a "carrot and stick" approach towards Turkey in contentions about security, sovereignty, and economic activity, it does not opt for such compelling measures in matters of human rights. The case of Osman Kavala, the leading patron of democracy activism in Turkey, is a significant example. Kavala has been imprisoned for almost four years now, accused of using violence and conspiring with foreign states to overthrow the government, despite the decision of

the Constitutional Court of Turkey. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruling in favour of the release of Kavala has also remained ineffective thus far.

The reason why the EU governing bodies do not exert effective pressure in human rights issues has several explanations, one being the complex and unwieldy governance structure of the EU. However, the true cause can be found in that the anti-migration agenda tops human rights concerns in foreign politics. This implies that the EU strongly needs the presence of a complicit authoritarian government in Turkey—something that the AKP currently offers—which is able to stop the advent of the millions of Syrian refugees and now possibly the Afghan refugees into its borders.

Such an obvious link is not adequately addressed in the conversation between the European and Turkish human rights activists. The responsibility of solidarity providers is not clearly defined to persuade the EU government and its justice mechanisms to take a firm stance against the human rights violations in Turkey. Furthermore, there is the inter-connected responsibility on the part of solidarity providers to counter the anti-migration and xenophobic stances in the EU and other northern states, that habitually export the catastrophic excesses of neoliberal globalization and colonial exploitation to peripheral countries like Turkey.

This situation also calls for questioning the reliance of transnational solidarity networks on states and international mechanisms that are prone to reflecting the agendas of powerful states. In this respect, the pursuit of decolonizing and de-neoliberalizing solidarity relations should start from a diligent problematization of states and their interests in foreign politics. More broadly, this pursuit should entail, as German critical theorist Alex Demirovic contends, “free and self-determined forms of cooperation, the transfer of knowledge and joint co-ordinated production” among the southern and northern solidarity activists.

Towards a Reworking of the Concept of Solidarity

Germany-based Syrian intellectual Yassin al-Haj Saleh raises a perceptive critique of transnational solidarity frameworks and the unequal relationship between the western providers of solidarity and the recipients in formerly-colonized contexts. He calls attention to the selective endorsement of political causes and the division of otherwise inter-connected sufferings by transnational solidarity providers. He suggests discarding the notion of solidarity since it is inherently western-centric and hierarchical. Instead, he proposes “partnership” which he defines as a non-centric and egalitarian form of relationship, maybe owing to the concept’s less politically-charged, seemingly neutral background.

Differing from Al-Haj Saleh, what I suggest is a reworking of the concept of solidarity as it is doubtful whether such partnership is realizable given the present structure of unequal access to power and resources, and the current absence of the means to transform this situation. In the above sections, I tried to demonstrate the complications stemming from the transnational political economy of solidarity networks and suggested some shifts to decolonize and de-neoliberalize them. Yet, there is another profound aspect of the problem which concerns the ethical and emotional dimensions of transnational solidarity. Focusing on these might help to address the affective discomfort at both ends of the solidarity network.

On the part of the southern and local actors, there is the very rightful feeling of anti-colonial resentment that potentially creates disillusionment and despair when faced with the unfair frameworks of transnational solidarity. Not infrequently, these emotions can be incapacitating. On the part of the northern and metropolitan actors, usually motivated by a feeling of guilt due to their privileged status, the foreignness and complexity of political suffering in post-colonial contexts amount to a discrepancy which is very hard to resolve. That is to say, positive changes usually do not come in the way nor the time frame expected by solidarity providers. This situation either breeds technicalization and alienation as a defence mechanism, or burn-out syndrome which leads to withdrawing from activism.

In order to tackle this double-sided affective toll in solidarity networks, Emmanuel Levinas's conception of alterity as "the insistence that others always remain irreducible to representation" may prove to be helpful. For Levinas, engagement with the Other is not a political but an ethical connection. As he said, "[t]he best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes". He suggested instead a visceral connection with them, preceding the categories and representations that mark difference.[10] As such, he sought to describe the fundamental moral obligation that furnishes the grounds for solidarity.

In her discussion concerning solidarity, Judith Butler explicates Levinas's consideration of alterity with the notions of mutual vulnerability and intersubjectivity that indicate "a certain intertwinement between that other life, all those other lives, and my own—one that is irreducible to national belonging or communitarian affiliation".[11] What I want to add to this is the recognition of the mutable and multi-positional constitution of alterity as a means of advancing the conception of solidarity. That is, the positions of subalternity and dominance are not fixed but rather prone to change, and a subject often occupies both of these in their different social settings. Therefore, they have the experience and knowledge of what those positions entail, which presents a potential basis for the empathetic acknowledgement of suffering and practicing solidarity.[12]

All in all, the pursuit of keeping solidarity as a concrete universal of ethical politics is still meaningful if we want to uphold an internationalist vision for emancipatory struggles against neoliberal authoritarianism. This entails much-needed ideological work that involves critiquing the existing solidarity practices while experimenting with new forms and thinking about how to expand the concept. Confronting the colonial and neoliberal relations at the macro level is one part of this endeavour, which needs to be reinforced with a self-reflective stance towards the everyday subjective experiences of difference and inequality.

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[1] C. B. Tansel, *States of Discipline: Authoritarian Neoliberalism and the Contested Reproduction of Capitalist Order*, London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017.

[2] R. Connell & N. Dados, "Where in the world does neoliberalism come from? The market agenda in southern perspective", *Theory and Society*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2014, pp. 117–38.

[3] M. Erol, "State and labour under AKP rule in Turkey: An appraisal", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 21, 2018, pp. 1–15.

[4] Sogge, D., "Civic Space: Shrinking from the outside in?" *Revista Iberoamericana de Estudios de Desarrollo*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2020, pp. 74–98.

[5] For instance, the ECHR recognizes the forever-lagging Inquiry Commission on the State of Emergency of Turkey as a fair justice mechanism, despite the significant amount of grievances about its arbitrary and extra-legal review processes expressed by the applicants, jurists, and labour unions. The commission was established by the AKP government to review the tens of thousands of cases involving human rights abuses, the firing of staff, the shutting down of CSOs, and confiscations in the aftermath of the coup attempt in 2016.

[6] M. E. Keck & K. Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998, p. 2.

[7] A. Murdie & M. Polizzi, "Human rights and transnational advocacy networks", *The Oxford Handbook of Political Networks*, edited by J.N. Victor, A.H. Montgomery, & M. Lubell, Oxford University Press, 2016.

[8] C. Bob, "The market for human rights", *Advocacy Organizations and Collective Action*, edited by A. Prakash and M.K. Gugerty, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 133–54.

[9] A. Jensen, C. Thuesen, & J. Geraldi, "The projectification of everything: Projects as a human condition", *Project Management Journal*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2016, pp. 21–34.

[10] E. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Phillippe Nemo*, trans. R. Cohen, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985, p. 85.

[11] Judith Butler, "Precarious life, vulnerability, and the ethics of cohabitation", *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 26, 2012, p. 140.

[12] Recognizing and reflecting on the metropolis-peripheral axis in transnational solidarity relations, which refers to the presence of disadvantaged and advantaged positions within both the northern and southern contexts, can be one of the strategies to achieve this. That is, an actor within the solidarity network is likely to occupy both positions in their different settings, such as in the case of a southern activist based in the metropolis of their country cooperating with both Indigenous and northern activists. The awareness of the mutability of subaltern and dominant positions can enable the broadening of empathy and prevent the reification of identities.

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SPONSORED BY THE ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG WITH FUNDS OF THE FEDERAL MINISTRY FOR ECONOMIC COOPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY (BMZ)
