CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN TURKEY'S DEMOCRACY: THE CASE OF "OY VE ÖTESİ"

To date in Turkey's young democracy, core pillars of the democratic process have largely been left to the mercy of political parties and state institutions, while the participation of civil society and the population at large, other than through voting, has been limited in comparison. This lack of involvement is particularly paradoxical given the diverse and complex nature of Turkey's demographics, requiring a strong web of institutions for a stable democratic system. Grassroots movements, such as Oy ve Ötesi (Vote and Beyond), must and will play a critical role in creating the much required momentum in civic engagement towards strengthening core pillars of Turkey's democracy.

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"At a time when virtually every fundamental and irreversible political decision directly affecting our lives seemed distant, untouchable, and completely beyond our control, *Oy ve Ötesi* lit a beacon of trust in bringing about tangible change in our lives and those of others." While perhaps reactionary and sentimental after a 28-hour marathon of election monitoring and dispute resolution in one of Istanbul's remote districts, this testimonial by an *Oy ve Ötesi* volunteer following the local elections in March 2014 underlines a substantial shortcoming in the interaction between state and society with respect to due democratic impact mechanisms and beliefs. A lawyer by training, our volunteer was most moved by her ability to contribute to and participate in one of the many democratic processes directly and visibly impacting her life – an act that until then seemed distant and unapproachable.

For several decades and their corresponding generations in Turkey, politics has been the least preferred career option for the country's talent, despite the strong predisposition by Turkey's young population to push its country forward. A combination of the almost regular military interventions to the democratic process since Turkey first moved to a multiparty system, numerous corruption scandals irreversibly degrading the reputation of politicians in the public eye, and fears based on the consequences of political activism in previous generations led Turkey's youth to distance themselves from politics as well as the civil society surrounding it.[1]

For some, this distancing takes the form of talking down on politicians and political processes, marking them as fundamentally and unalterably corrupt and immoral. This, in turn, leads to the conclusion that leading an ethical life and being involved in politics are mutually exclusive. For others, approaching the matter from a Machiavellian perspective, achievement in politics depends on key success factors, such as being part of a large societal establishment, e.g. a religious sect or ethnic group, and endless wealth, which are intrinsically unachievable unless one is born into them. All in all, being part of the decision-making process is perceived to be a risky matter for which few appear willing to make the sacrifice, rather than an honorable civic duty suitable for and accessible to those with high aspirations for the society they live in.

The end result we observe is an army of dissatisfied people with diverse political perspectives and desires, who are not able to take action within an institution that they feel is compatible with their broader values. Subsequently, this leads to an alienation from all that is related to politics in any shape or form, further weakening

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[1] This is particularly the case since the military *coup* of 1980, before which Turkey's youth was very much engaged in politics. After 1980, state repression on one hand and promotion of a culture of consumerism on the other helped create apolitical generations.

the civic involvement required for a functional and sustainable democracy. For example, there are about 1.5 million active NGOs in the US, but only about 100,000 in Turkey.[2] Further, many of these NGOs are perceived to be lacking in fundraising capabilities, organizational effectiveness, and area of influ-

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ence. This, in turn, leads to a vicious cycle that keeps talent from entering the world of NGOs, further weakening the prospect of expanding civic engagement.

In the aftermath of the *Gezi* resistance, there was an encouraging break in this cycle. Unexpectedly and rapidly, groups of people from various ideologies and levels of prior political engagement started coming together to find ways to be involved in the decisions that affect their lives. The wide spectrum of answers people sought in the various platforms formed in the following months included traditional revolutionary/reformist approaches across the board, such as redesigning entire systems of education, law, and health care, with a touch of longer-term alternatives primarily centered around grassroots mobilization and investment in political awareness. As the vast majority of participants in *Gezi* had no previous experience in political engagement or related civil society activities, both their ability as well as stamina for pursuing tangible change over the long-term was rather limited. Because large scale impact seemed risky, unpredictable, and at times unachievable, the lights at dinner tables hosting late-night political discussions began going out one by one some months after the street protests.

It was at this moment when the movement *Oy ve Ötesi* (meaning "Vote and Beyond") was formed with three concrete, concise, and objective targets that, if executed well, would present a first opportunity to train the forgotten muscle of collaboration towards impact. The three targets we chose to focus on were voter turnout, transparency around individual candidates, and independent election monitoring. Further, the "*Ötesi*" (Beyond) component conveyed a clear glimpse of the founders' vision that the approach and mechanisms could readily be replicated into any area of civic engagement in democratic processes.

While all three targets were critically important, the third objective, to which volunteers felt they were able to contribute directly, turned out to have the highest impact in mobilizing an otherwise distant voter population. More than 40,000 volunteers,

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2 "Fact Sheet: Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the United States," *Humanrights.gov*, 12 January 2012, http://www.humanrights.gov/fact-sheet-non-governmental-organizations-ngos-in-the-united-states.html

who had previously been mostly politically inactive, put in 24-hour unpaid shifts at ballot stations over three elections in 2014. While the first two objectives will be briefly touched on below, the third objective will be elaborated on in detail.

"Voters typically do not even know the name of the MP for whom they are voting."

The first objective of *Oy ve Ötesi* was to increase voter turnout. While Turkey enjoys one of the highest voter turn-out rates in Europe, there was growing skepticism, particularly by the youth, regarding the elections. Many saw them to be legitimizing a dysfunctional system where the opposition did not present a real alternative. Indeed, according to recent polls, the "undecided" segment is at an all-time high as of the first quarter of 2015, and represents almost a third of voters.[3] This unhappy segment has been the second-largest group of voters for a number of years and they no longer seemed to want to opt for the "lesser of evils." *Oy ve Ötesi* pioneered a number of online and offline campaigns, leveraging celebrities and street humor, to underscore the importance of participating in the elections at a time when Turkey was waking up to a new set of fundamental changes in policy making. The campaigns were largely embraced and supported by local and national TV outlets, columnists, and opinion leaders, however support by pro-government outlets was relatively limited. Further, the campaigns triggered a number of parallel efforts by NGOs and political parties, leading to a nationwide wave of pro-vote mobilization. Combined with ever-growing political tensions fueled by the political parties in the running, the result was a record-high voter turnout of nearly 90 percent (by way of comparison, the voter turnout in the recent Greek legislative elections was 64 percent).[4]

Secondly, *Oy ve Ötesi* aimed to facilitate the link between candidates and voters. Concretely, the objective was to ensure that the voters had a better understanding of who their candidates were, what they had accomplished so far, and what their visions were for their prospective domains of influence. Specifically, communication teams shot two-minute videos of candidates, answering the same question in front of the same background, giving them an equal chance to explain themselves to their audience. This was particularly important in the face of vast gaps in campaign budgets of different political parties, where a large share of political parties simply did not have the resources to have their candidates be heard. The videos, posted publicly, answered two action-oriented and tangible questions: "What is the biggest

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3 KONDA, January 2015. From presentation notes by Chairman Bekir Ağırdır at Limmud.
4 Data as of 26 January 2014, http://www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?CountryCode=GR

issue in your district?" and "How do you plan to go about solving it?" In the current system where candidates are determined centrally rather than through a primary election, the "customer" for a candidate is first and foremost the party leadership. The result is that voters, particularly in urban areas with large populations, typically do not even know the name of the MP for whom they are voting. This, in turn, has an impact on direct accountability. Our second objective was that, as voters demand greater access to the individuals meant to represent them, political parties would inescapably and naturally need to shift their mechanisms towards greater inclusion of voter preferences.

The third objective of *Oy ve Ötesi*, the one that gained the most public attention, was election monitoring. Especially in the last couple of decades, concerns, and outcries about election fraud have been commonplace in national media. Regardless of the winners and losers of the race, the fact that people did not trust the election results was in and of itself a problem. In the end, the existence of a genuine chance of someone else winning is the true mark of a functioning democracy. With this in mind, *Oy ve Ötesi* set the difficult but achievable target of independently monitoring the 30,000-plus voting stations in Istanbul – Turkey's largest city – for the March 2014 local elections. The message was clear: owning the process, at your own voting station or at a district level depending on your resources and priorities, is a tangible and constructive way to being part of the solution. We underscored on numerous occasions that this was by no means the whole picture, and that ensuring the transparency of Turkish elections would require involvement across the value chain, starting from the creation of voter lists, campaign financing, and the like. More needed to be done later down the road, but as per the landmark slogan of the *Gezi* resistance: "This is just the beginning..."[5]

Over the past few decades, various domestic election-monitoring groups have been formed across the world, from Peru's *Transparencia* to the Kenyan K-DOP (Kenya Domestic Observation Programme).[6] Tailoring key lessons from global efforts to the needs and realities of Turkey's election system, *Oy ve Ötesi* structured election monitoring in two key steps: the process at the voting station and parallel vote tabulation.

At this point, it is essential to highlight the underlying reason that makes independent monitoring particularly important in Turkey. Turkey's fairly detailed and objective election law and regulations rely on the border-line naive assumption that there is balanced – if not equal – representation by all competing political parties at the ballot box, both quantitatively and qualitatively. In other words, the system gives a

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5 "Bu daha başlangıç, mücadeleye devam" was commonly chanted during the resistance.
6 "The Work of Domestic election Observer Groups Around the World," *European Union External Action,* p. 18,
http://eeas.europa.eu/eueom/pdf/promoting-and-defending-democracy_en.pdf

strong upper hand to any political party that can cover more ballot boxes, and cover them with better trained representatives. Thus, balancing the playing field for all political parties at the ballot box lies at the heart of *Oy ve Ötesi*'s mission.

The first step of *Oy ve* Ö*tesi*'s monitoring mission involved overseeing the voting and counting processes to ensure that they were conducted in line with the Supreme Electoral Council's rules and regulations, and to intervene on the spot where necessary. [7] Since there is no official status for independent observers in the Turkish election law, *Oy ve Ötesi* leadership made agreements with six political parties and one independent candidate, and our volunteers chose to carry observer badges from among these alternatives. Each Turkish citizen has the right to observe the entire election process and file an official complaint where necessary; in practice, however, officials may not grant access to observers without an official observer badge. Mostly organized through an effective use of social media combined with the domino effect of mobilizing personal networks, during the local elections in March 2014 over 26,000 volunteers took part in Istanbul's 32,000 voting stations and covered nearly 95 percent of the votes cast.[8] One of the most inspiring aspects was the fact that 97 percent of the volunteers assigned a role in the process actually showed up, signaling strong ownership for and the credibility of the *Oy ve Ötesi* initiative.

The second stage of monitoring involved aggregation (tabulation) of votes, which was the primary source of the public controversy. Serious concerns regularly raised in the press around the transparency and reliability of the "SECSIS" system, which utilizes a non-public tabulation algorithm, motivated us to create our own code for parallel tabulation. With official copies of election results from each ballot box at hand, we were able to identify discrepancies within 36 hours of polling stations closing. Given the sensitivity of the matter, we utilized a crowd-sourced confirmation mechanism for our election result input called T3 (*Türkiye Tutanak Teyit* – Turkey Election Results Confirmation). The T3 distributed an electronic version of the election result from each ballot box to three random volunteers across the globe who simply input what they saw into our system. We confirmed the results only if three randomly selected volunteers, with no possibility of communicating with one another, input the same results looking at the same result sheet. This yielded a near 100 percent accuracy in our tabulation results, and the discrepancies we identified were communicated to the respective parties, along with a promise of official copies of the results, which were required should they pursue an official claim at the Supreme Electoral Council.

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7 *Yüksek Seçim Kurulu*, [Supreme Electoral Council], www.ysk.gov.tr
8 Some schools had less volunteers than the number of ballot boxes, but the volunteers were mobile and able to obtain multiple ballot box results, leading to the high coverage as a share of total votes cast vs. the number of ballot boxes covered.

Immediately after the election, in line with the deadlines for claims processing, *Oy ve Ötesi* declared that across both stages, no systematic discrepancy large enough to impact the results and/or suspicious enough to cloud the credibility of the election day was observed in the areas covered by our volunteers. That said, non-standard/arbitrary practice by officials, random restrictions to observer access, improper stamping of

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voting papers, attempts to verbally persuade elderly voters, and taking pictures of the polling papers in the cabins were commonly observed practices. Some appeared to originate from simple lack of knowledge about due process and regulations, others were possibly intentional. Further, it is rather difficult to rule out the possibility that the fact that we observed a fair election was partly a result of our preemptive approach, as we had discussed in our training sessions. What would have happened if we had not been there? It is difficult to know. The legal case of the disputed results in the Kağıthane district, where the reports submitted as evidence were provided by *Oy ve Ötesi* volunteers, appears to be one of the few cases where our presence made a visible difference. Yet it is clearly more difficult and daring to influence the process if you know someone is watching. All in all, our hypothesis fully supports our conclusion with respect to the presence of independent observers on election day: until the day all competing parties are equally successful at covering voting stations, *Oy ve Ötesi*'s presence will be integral to the transparency and credibility of election day.

For volunteers and followers of *Oy ve Ötesi* alike, the immediate impact of the project was that the election process, with its strengths and shortcomings, was monitored by an independent and transparent third party. More importantly, thousands of people felt that they were part of a first in Turkish Republic's history: the largest grassroots movement that visibly contributed to enhancing the credibility of the electoral processes. However, we expect and already observe that the impact of mobilizing over 40,000 volunteers extends far beyond election day:

- **Hope.** We witnessed and demonstrated that it is possible and necessary to get organized around fixing chronic and seemingly irresolvable issues. This can be replicated for a wide range of social issues, from environment/sustainability to city planning, that are a large and growing concern to many today.

- **Knowledge**. Many of us had the chance to take a good look inside the political parties we voted for at various levels. While not the whole story, presence at voting stations – both with respect to quality and quantity – is a good reflection of the organizational capabilities and vision of political parties. With a hands-on personal story, tens of thousands of people are in a better position to voice their demands and priorities, and reflect them in the next vote they cast.

- **Viral impact.** 40,000 people saw the value of being part of the solution and being present while telling their story and laying out their political perspective. Our volunteers very much enjoyed the experience; they serve as *de facto* ambassadors of the project, and some are also taking part in other civil or political initiatives. It is one thing to talk about the snowball effect, it is another to *become* a snowflake and feel its power.

- **The power of technology and communication.** We live in an era of rapid change, in which speed of communication is both a tremendous gift and a challenge. We were able to leverage social media, smart phones, and offline channels to organize ourselves. At the same time, communicating the right messages in the right way and to the right audience was critical to success.

Turkey's experimentation with a multiparty democratic race is about 70 years old, depending on where you mark its beginning. The institutions that support the pillars of our democracy are young, and today, more than ever before, they need civil society's support and cultivation.

Established by eight, owned and carried forward by thousands, *Oy ve Ötesi* rested upon a strong motto: "If you truly believe in something, you find a way. If you don't, you find an excuse." Our experience showed that with the right set of talent, willpower, and perseverance much can be achieved with civic participation, despite challenging circumstances. *Oy ve Ötesi* is a proven channel for all who chose to be part of solution. We believe the seed *Oy ve Ötesi* planted will help cultivate further channels in numerous areas of civic engagement, thereby strengthening Turkey's democracy.