

A Critical Perspective on Turkish Modernization and Structure of Society: İdris Küçükömer*

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Abstract: İdris Küçükömer comes across as an important intellectual in the post-1960s, when a significant movement in intellectual life was experienced in Turkey along with social and political life. Küçükömer, who like many intellectuals of the period advocated social change centered on bureaucracy and the military and considered the importance of the relationship through formations within the military, centered on the concept of civil society by abandoning the junta-based understanding in the second half of the 1960s. This quest, which began with the question of why a civil society in the Western sense was not within the Turkish social structure, opened the way to Küçükömer's re-handling and re-examining of Turkish social and political history at the center of this concept. This initiative of Küçükömer also carries the quality of a critical look at the bureaucracy-centered modernization process of Turkey from one side. This study is the effort to examine İdris Küçükömer's views on the Turkish modernization process. İdris Küçükömer is an important resource in discussions to be made on Turkish modernization and social structure from the perspective of his approach to the issue in terms of civil society. He researched the reasons for the lack of civil societies and lack of emerging class issues in Turkey, and posed very important questions to the history of Turkey on this topic. This critique, which comes particularly from within leftist thought on the Western and bureaucratic structure of Turkey's process of modernization and social change, has the quality of being a herald for many discussions these days.

Keywords: modernization • change • bureaucracy • military • civil society

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The Military, Intellectuals, and Politics in Post-1960 Turkey

On May 27, 1960, the military seized power in Turkey and handed it over to the National Unity Committee, which the military had created. From behind the coup, a professors' declaration was published that affirmed and legitimized the coup. This declaration in summary emphasized that the state had begun to represent one party's interests before May 27th, that the government had violated the constitution, and that the National Unity Committee was a result of the reestablishing of state order (Çavdar, 1996, p. 90).

The bureaucracy and military-based cadres endeavored to seize again, even more so, the power they had had in their hands prior to 1950. Şerif Mardin (1990, pp. 60–61) assessed this situation as the newly acquired form of the old polarization against the Periphery and as “the polarization of those preserving the old Republican order (i.e., coercion-based order) against those wanting change.”

The hegemony that the military established in social and political areas shows itself primarily in the self-control they had applied in the structuring of political parties and their activities. The Democratic Party was shut down through the May 27th Revolution, and the establishment and operations of political parties were prohibited. Three new political parties that would be effective in political life, the Justice Party, the New Turkey Party, and the Workers Party of Turkey (TIP), leaped into political life in 1961 on February 11, 12, and 13, respectively. The Republican People's Party and the Republican Villagers Nation Party continued their political activities alongside these.

The Justice Party, which had a complex structure and contained many social strata within such as the bourgeoisie of commerce, artisans and small craftsmen, Anatolian notables, and big landowners, in addition to constantly empowering industrialists (Sencer, 1971, pp. 274–276), was formed by retired general Ragıp Gümüşpala, and a group formed of retired officers was found within the party. Through the mediation of this internal group, the Justice Party endeavored to keep its relations with the military at a certain level. The Republican People's Party (CHP) of the period, maintaining its traditional policies, continued to lean on the civil-military bureaucratic staff. Change and mobilization began to be experienced in CHP with the introduction of the *left of center* concept before the 1965 elections. On an even more important point for CHP, TIP had been established and was being quite effective. The Left of Center program had emerged under these conditions. Despite this program being considered new, the party endeavored to continue its relations with the civil and military bureaucracy in a powerful manner. What was experienced in the two major political parties of the period shows the influence of the military bureaucracy over politics.

The post-1960s was also the time with intense activity in Turkey's world of thought. The ideas that emerged and the discussions that were experienced are important in

terms of forming the basis for many of today's intellectual currents. The intellectuals of the period centered on social change and transformation. In this direction, the history of society was re-addressed and programs oriented toward the future were put forth through the essays that were done. Undoubtedly the most important formation of the period was the magazine *Yön* [direction]. The articles published in the magazine and the determinations and recommendations that were put forth, while not representing all of the period's leftist thinkers, did reflect the dominant views. A group of intellectuals, though not all who had written in this magazine, created an opposition using the magazine and researched the ways of power with common proposals for solutions. At this point, the magazine can be said to have had within it a relationship with radical officers within the military. The basis of the problem was first put forth as economic backwardness (i.e., a development problem). The solution in this case is rapid development. What was important here is how rapid development would be achieved. As clearly revealed in the declaration, statism had been determined as the way (Komisyon, 1961, pp. 12–13). The necessity of state intervention for carrying out reforms led to the cooperation of intellectuals in the vicinity of *YÖN* with the radical officers within the military. The demands for this type of reform were also sometimes emphasized by the radical officers within the military. This kind of overlap led the intellectuals around *YÖN* to emphasize in their theories the concepts of intermediate layers and energetic forces, whose basis the military officers and youths formed (Avcıoğlu, 1966, p. 9). The *YÖN* intellectuals, who had evaluated the working class to be inadequate and uninterested in social issues, even those related to them (Aşçıoğlu, 1967, p. 13), saw the power to reach a solution as “energetic forces” that they had primarily defined as the military, in addition to youths and intellectuals.

The Writings of İdris Küçükömer in *YÖN* and Energetic Forces

Küçükömer addressed the problems on two points: economic imbalance and inequality in income distribution. Inequality in income distribution had divided society into two groups: the happy minority and the great public mass living in primitive conditions. The system operated in line with the interests of the happy minority (Küçükömer, 1994a, p. 48). Elections were not the solution to the problem for Küçükömer because the public, of whom more than half were illiterate, could not be expected to evaluate the various alternatives and choose among them. Instead of elections, the gentry started social actions in villages and networks in the towns. In this situation, the majority of the public are forced to vote for their candidates, and this community constantly dominates administration of the state. This group cannot be expected to make political decisions counter to their own interests (Küçükömer, 1994b, pp. 18–19). Küçükömer's solution at this time was clearly the military. The real power that wanted constitutional change in Turkey and that formed a force

opposite the existing system is the “energetic forces,” which are the main force of the military and the youths at its side. The political parties had come together against this force and thus refined the *revolutionists* and *reactionaries* (Küçükömer, 1994c, pp. 27–28). Doing reforms was not possible with the current political parties because of the conservative clan within this system which they relied on. This structure of political parties made a solution that the public would do with voting impossible. The cultural structure had also already prevented this. On this point too is the solution of replacing the social structure.

The basic power that this would rely on was the military. The system had to be changed and social organization renewed with top-to-bottom reforms. At this time, İdris Küçükömer saw himself as distinguished, like many of the intellectuals around him, and he undertook a redemptive mission.

Towards the Alienation of Order

Küçükömer identified the constitution and the laws tied to it as the roof on the structure of political decision-making. The basic function of the state is to carry out decision making. The state does this in accordance with the constitution and the various laws that form the roof. The state receives the power that will take care of problems by providing the majority of peoples’ happiness. However, the political decision-making structure is not limited to the state and constitution. People, groups, and classes exist who will be able to affect, in favor or against, the decision made at the bottom of the structure. In a real democracy, these constituents are indispensable elements. Separating this bottom section from the political decision-making process leads the regime to an absolutist, oligarchy, or fascist regime (Küçükömer, 1994d pp. 53–54). According to Küçükömer (1994e, p. 133), the law, which binds people, must be the law that people accept by discussing it.

According to Küçükömer, sovereignty is the ability of a nation to make decisions for itself and to supervise them. Consequently, the state earns the legitimacy of its power by ensuring the happiness of the majority of the public. If the desires of the state are not identical to the desires of the public, then a social imbalance is said to exist in the environment. The sovereignty of the people can be limited by internal and external economic interests because these largely control the economic resources as well as the making and implementing of national decisions. Thus the mechanism of decision making and implementing has been conditioned by the interests of one clan. The legitimacy of the state’s power cannot remain in this case. The solution is to cut the relationship of the decision-making mechanism with the “historical internal and external economic interests” and thus ensure the sovereignty of the nation. This can also be provided through socialism (Küçükömer, 1994f, pp. 78–82).

In his writings from the second half of the 1960s, Küçükömer (1994g, p. 124) took the path from a junta solution to an understanding of civil society to a Marxist understanding of civil society. Policy formation, while explaining the function of the political decision-making mechanism and the formation of law, is on a line that holds community in the foreground and gives it importance. Küçükömer (1994h, p. 155) revealed the fundamental contradictions of Turkey as imperialism in his article *The TIP* [Workers Party of Turkey] *Program Must Change*.

Alienating Order: A Critique of Modernization

Küçükömer examined the existing situation up to the current period from a historical line. On this point, his first question, one of the first basic questions of the period, was “Why were the Ottomans unable to pass to the capitalist order?”, because being unable to do this would also explain why a working class hadn’t formed like in the West, which was being much discussed in leftist thought. Küçükömer advocated that the economic and social structure of the Ottoman Empire had prevented the transition to capitalism. The central government structure had prevented the accumulation of wealth, which is the basic condition for the institution of capitalism and formation of organizations. The accumulation of wealth after the shaking of the central power was deposited in the ground, which was considered the safest way to protect wealth at the time.

Küçükömer’s interest was in the relationship of westernization and imperialism with the structure, westernization efforts, and bureaucratic cadres conducting westernization that had emerged together with a great process of modernization from the classical Ottoman state order. Küçükömer placed the interest struggles of the bureaucrats and intellectuals on the basis of westernization movements. Innovation movements had come from the sultanate in the name of saving the state; however, the bureaucrats and intellectuals were effective, whose interests moved in line with the execution of this initiative. As a matter of fact, the senators had abandoned westernization movements again in line with their interests once certain desires had been fulfilled and had assumed an opposing attitude. The bureaucrats formed the basic force of the westernization movement within the process that had developed as a result of this (Küçükömer, 1994i, p. 55).

According to Küçükömer, all these efforts at westernization were baseless attempts. More importantly, these efforts fell in accordance with the imperialist initiatives of the capitalist West and prepared the groundwork for imperialism to enter the country. Bureaucrats tried to catch the capitalist order, which the West had reached at the end of a prolonged historical process of development through Westernization. However, the internal and external opportunities for this had not been available. In this case, institutions born only from the economic structure of the West could be imitated. Such a westernization, instead of establishing a civil society in the Western sense

“would be able to create an environment appropriate to the interests and ideology of a foreign social system on the economic base of capitalism, which would become increasingly imperialistic. In fact, it was like this” (Küçükömer, 1994i, p. 14).

According to Küçükömer, the baseless westernization initiatives, or rather those based externally, gave birth to two important consequences. First, these initiatives facilitated the entry of imperialism, which had begun to be widespread, into the country, and the bureaucrats who performed westernization without understanding the Western social structure succumbed to the status of being Western collaborators. The West had come particularly through bureaucrats because “the state structure of Ottoman society had opened the way for influence to penetrate Ottoman society only from bureaucracy” (Küçükömer, 1994i, p. 59). Secondly, Western secular bureaucrat fell opposite the public, which could not accept westernization, and this duality in Turk society has survived to this day. “This contrast prevents the kernel or seed at the base of Anatolian society from flourishing; it even refutes it” (Küçükömer, 1994i, p. 82). Because of this duality, the reaction of the Anatolian people could not turn into a class movement.

Küçükömer placed his response to the Western bureaucrats and the progressive reactionary debates that had been experienced since the start of the modernization process on the left-side/right-side scheme, which he had faced opposite in his study *The Alienation of Order*. Küçükömer used the term “resisters” for the group he called the left side, which he himself identified with, and used the term “representative” for the group he called the right side. Küçükömer accepted that bureaucratic cadres were present at the head of both groups. However, the group he called the left side within the political struggle relied on the traditions coming from the unity of Janissary, tradesmen, and Muslim scholars in order to come to power and uses the public masses. Therefore, despite bureaucrats being on both sides, the mass that is taken as the base is quite different (Küçükömer, 1994i, p. 73). Küçükömer, while reversing the progressive reactionary scheme that had on one hand become a habit, on the other hand he emphasized that this was not Turkey’s main contradiction, drawing attention to imperialism and assessing bureaucracy’s efforts of Western modernization as having prepared the groundwork for imperialism.

Results

The writings from Küçükömer are a critique on the narrowly grouped left, which has a bureaucratic structure. Küçükömer, instead of breaking the bureaucratic structure that he intensely criticized, took part in it and even tended to empower it. Instead of being organized in public on this point, they endeavored to be organized within the bureaucratic structure. They were thinking within the traditional bureaucratic system. Those in power tried to come to power with a splash, without leaning on any one class

or group like the bureaucratic cadres they criticized. Küçükömer sought a solution apart from the one that the intellectuals, who were within a bureaucratic system of thought, had put forth as arriving at power as soon as possible and organizing society through reforms. It was within a secular quest connected with the base.

Küçükömer was one side in the discussions within the left and he endeavored to show the masses, who would be reliant on the left. The solution points from the articles he wrote have recommendations to the left. These articles served as a warning for the right to not impersonate a bureaucratic structure. He harshly criticized Western modernization based on bureaucracy in the historical process. He took to socialism on his final solution point in his writings from the end of the 1960s. According to him, the basic contradiction was the contradiction it has with imperialism, and independence is our problem (Aybar, 1988, pp. 246–253). The basic strategy Küçükömer recommended was the inclusion of the left and the people, who have always been neglected even today and have been described as reactionary, opposite the historical bureaucracy. This is seen clearly in the findings put forth both within the Workers Party of Turkey and within the Social Democratic Party.

İdris Küçükömer is an important resource in discussions to be done over Turkish modernization and social structure in terms of his approach to this topic over civil society. He investigated the reasons for the lack of civil society and the absence of class issues in Turkey, and he directed questions on this issue quite significant to Turkey's history. This critique of Turkey's modernization and social change processes, which came particularly from within leftist thought, has the quality of heralding many discussions these days.

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