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For now, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's Helalleşme,[2] the mutual forgiveness of wrongdoings in Turkish politics, is a floating call for communal peace. Although the call does not explicitly mention Armenians or other non-Muslim minorities, referring to the pursuit of dealing with the past, including the decisions and actions of Kılıçdaroğlu's own party, active public discussion of Helalleşme by civil society, including minorities, has raised a question of the potential implications of such a call for different victim groups. In this piece, I will not discuss the terminological weaknesses or strengths of Helalleşme. Instead, I will try to reflect on the systematically reproduced negative symbolism of the Armenian identity in the eyes of the Turkish state and society by raising the question: "If Armenians are to be considered for Helalleşme, then how do you reconcile with an object designated as hatesome?" I will also try to explain why a public call for Helalleşme, if not followed by an apology for the past injustices as the first step, and tangible changes in the condition of the victim groups as the second step, is a way of circumventing past injustices by offering a simulacrum of reconciliation, a shadow of peace without the actual substance of peace. The simulacrum of reconciliation is not only prone to reproduce past injustices but also decreases the capacity of the victims to have hope in the future and imagine genuine reconciliation attempts in the future.

The fact that Kılıçdaroğlu has mentioned the 1942 Wealth Tax in his calls for Helalleşme is an unprecedented move in the history of the CHP. However, the legitimate question to ask here is about the reason behind omitting the critical years of the 1920s that lay the foundation of the law-making mechanisms, legitimizing postgenocide political and economic order[3] and systemic discrimination against Armenians, Jews, Greeks, Assyrians, Kurds and Alevis.

Official Public Apologies and Reconciliation

When thinking of Helalleşme, apology as an important element comes to mind. Official public apologies occupy a critical place in a transitional justice policy.[4] Apologies can help society face historical injustices and pay respect and compensation to victims by establishing them as equal citizens of the country. The genuine apologies should address the wrongdoings without intentionally limiting their scope or redirecting blame.[5] The literature on apologies

provides an insightful theoretical framework for analyzing Turkish officials' public calls for reconciliation. Dixon offers four main factors that determine the officials' possibility or resistance to public apologies:[6]

1. The readiness of the political elites to offer a public apology and contrition depends on the perceived extent and likelihood of material costs (restitution, reparations, territory).
2. The readiness of the officials to come to terms with the dark past will be less likely if it damages the founding narrative of the state and the nation.
3. Officials will be reluctant to offer a public apology if such action decreases public support for the state or the political party, especially when the more significant part of society has a robust emotional attachment to the nation's founding narrative.
4. Officials will be reluctant to offer a public apology if there is resistance by the more significant part of society against such acknowledgements of past wrongdoings in favor of preserving the status quo.

While all four factors apply to the context of the Turkish state's relation to the Armenian issue, the second factor of the state's founding narrative is particularly significant due to the institutional impunity and its reinforcement of structural inequality and emotional alienation that continue shaping lives of the Armenian community in the present. The state's narrative of the glorious past reproduces Armenians as internal threats, collaborators and separatists, who are "illegitimate others" that can never "be us", and whose proximity can endanger love for the nation. Sara Ahmed makes a valuable contribution to the role of emotions in politics, emphasizing the crucial impact of such emotional differentiations, produced by official narratives, on the bodies of those "who can be loved" and those "who cannot be grieved".[7] The internalization of the state's narrative by the larger segments of society also means the internalization of emotional reading of bodies as having legitimate and illegitimate lives. This brings us back to the third and fourth factors on the apology, conditioned by the domestic considerations in determining the readiness or reluctance of officials to offer an apology to the victims of historical injustices.

Alienation of Armenian Identities in Turkey and Turkey's Politics

I would like to look into the 'Armenian defamation' lawsuits filed by leading Turkish politicians Abdullah Gül in 2009, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in 2012 and the most recent defamation lawsuit filed by Meral Akşener to see how they reify the alienation of Armenian identity in domestic politics. The frequency with which the Turkish politicians accuse their political opponents of their hidden Armenian origin is a reminder to the public that Armenianness is something that needs to be kept far away; it should not mess with you; you have no chance in your political career in Turkey if you have proximity with that identity, it is a dark mark. The state's public outcry over the possibility of any prominent Turkish politician to be a hidden Armenian reveals the disgust and fear of any proximity the Armenianness can have to the actual decision-making process in Turkey. The state's close surveillance of the Armenians, who were forced to convert to Islam after the genocide, shows that in the eyes of the state, the Armenian identity sticks with you no matter how hard you try to conceal it.

In 1997, at the opening ceremony of the police station, then Minister of Internal Affairs Meral Akşener used the infamous "Ermeni Dölü" while referring to Abdullah Öcalan. Apologizing for these words after the debates in the Parliament, Akşener reinforced the discourse of disgust toward the Armenian identity by saying, "I meant the Armenian race in general, not the Armenians living in Turkey". Akşener's accusation suggests that the Armenian root in Öcalan is what animated his desire for the destruction of all possible foundations of the Turkish state. Such actions by the country's top officials reproduce the racialized social norms, which profoundly affect and shape the political culture of Turkey.

The critical part here is the repetitive character of the state's attempts to seal the Armenian identity as an alien object, reminding society that the Armenian identity is the most undesirable of all known identities. The representation by the media of Armenian subjectivity as the internal threat and simply someone who will permanently harm the national unity transforms the bodies of Armenians into vulnerable objects open to hateful attacks. In the video leaked to the media years after Hrant Dink's assassination, the members of the law enforcement body show their full support of Dink's murderer, whom policemen asked to pose in private photos while holding a Turkish flag: "Strike a nice pose for your brother, come on. Strike a nice pose and smile. Well done my boy". Ahmed notices that hate may respond to the particular, but it tends to do so by aligning the particular with the general: "I hate you

because you are this or that, where the ‘this’ or ‘that’ evokes a group that the individual comes to stand in for”.[8] The timing of the discursive and legal transformation of the figure of Hrant Dink into a matter of national security is significant if we consider that 2005-2007 was a period of discourses on inclusive citizenship and multiculturalism.

Although in 2013 Erdoğan called for “Helalleşme”, the government failed to deliver on any of its promises for reconciliation. In his call, Erdoğan notices that now “it is not time for reckoning, but to even the odds,” implying that confrontation [with the past] and Helalleşme are two opposite actions.[9] For instance, despite the public condemnation of the policies against Alevis in the 1930s by then Prime Minister Erdoğan, his words were not followed by any policies that would stop Alevis’ discrimination and human rights violations. Some might argue that Kılıçdaroğlu’s call could not be actualized yet and that the CHP, being an opposition, lacks the administrative resources and power that Erdoğan, as the leader of the ruling party, had back then. More importantly, beyond the agencies of the political parties and leaders, the public demands that sounded in Turkey in 2013 bear striking differences from the situation now in 2022, as the latter involves a predominance of nationalistic desires as opposed to relative openness to the pluralism of the former. Nevertheless, the problem with Kılıçdaroğlu’s call for Helalleşme is that it is still constructed upon the fantasy of a reconciliation where victims, in an instance, forgive the past wrongdoings; and without getting stuck in the past too long, the unified body of the nation can move forward toward a democratic and just future.

What Makes An Official Public Apology Genuine?

A public apology is an empty word if not followed by tangible changes in the improvement of the condition of the affected groups. Moreover, the repetitiveness of such empty apologies without practical steps can turn the apology into a commodity, normalizing such acts used by the political elites as cynical political maneuvering. In that case, apologies and calls for reconciliation can be readily given up once the circumstances change since such apologies were initially not meant to deal with past grievances genuinely.

When the state unilaterally projects calls for reconciliation from above, failing to consider the great inequality of agency between itself and the affected groups, who are, in this case, expected to adjust themselves to the state-initiated project, it trivializes the reconciliation

process. While emphasizing the need for social justice, the continuous reproduction of Alevis, Kurds, Armenians, Jews, Greeks, LGBT, and other minorities as the radical Other and as internal threats to the national security; impunity following killings and gross violations of human rights of the 'illegitimate lives'[10] are operational in unmasking the unwillingness on behalf of the state to engage in a genuine reconciliation process.

As Ahmed argues, the projects of reconciliation and reparation are not about the "nation recovering", nor is it about "feeling better", but whether the victims of past injustices can heal after telling their stories and exposing their wounds and get recognition of their injury or receive other forms of compensation.[11] If the new calls for peace made by the political elites in Turkey continue resting on the state's fantasy of what binds national subjects together and fail to recognize the agency and responsibility of the state for the past wrongdoings, it will shed severe doubts on the readiness to end the profoundly alienating discourse and the institutionalized discrimination, blocking the state-society collective transformation.

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[2] Editor's Note: The term helalleşme broadly translates to making amends. For a discussion of the concept, see Yeşim Yaprak Yıldız, Dealing with the Past in Turkey: What Does the Call for Helalleşme Mean?, #TJUpdatesFromTurkey, 29 November 2022.

[3] Talin Suciyan, The Armenians In Modern Turkey: Post-Genocide Society, Politics And History, I.B.Tauris, 2016.

[4] More Than Words: Apologies as a Form of Reparation, International Center for Transitional Justice, December 2015.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Jennifer M. Dixon, Dark Pasts: Changing the State's Story in Turkey and Japan, Cornell University Press, 2018.

[7] Sara Ahmed, The Cultural Politics of Emotion, Routledge, 2014.

[8] Ibid.

[9] 2013'te Erdoğan "Yeni bir Türkiye kurma çabası içinde değiliz, Cumhuriyeti özüyle, ruh köküyle buluşturma gayreti içindeyiz. Şimdi ayrıştırmanın değil bayramlaşmanın, müsafahanın (el sıkışma) zamanı, hesaplaşmanın değil helalleşmenin zamanı" dedi.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.