



LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN ISTANBUL

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In Turkey, the authoritative relationship between state and society is mitigated by the populist political culture. And while the country's populism has many roots, two main factors have contributed to its prominence: the vital demands from new urban citizens after rapid urbanisation since the 1960s, and an understanding of democracy reduced in its simplest form to voting.

There is no doubt that the will and the need for decentralisation in Turkey accelerated with urbanisation. Since the Turkish central government could neither control the mass urban migration, nor answer the vital demands emanating from the millions of new migrants, the masses produced their own 'local solutions' while public officials merely stood by. In exchange, migrants – eager to reward populist political parties that promised to tolerate informal job and housing markets – crowned politicians with votes and political powers. This system persisted until increasing complications stemming from the densification and diversity of urban settlements gave rise to the need for an effective and decentralised urban administration.

The main obstacle to what may be termed 'institutional' localisation in Turkey is democratisation. Partly from fear of an internal fracturing along ethnic lines, especially with regards to the Kurdish population, demands for 'decentralisation for democracy' have not been welcomed by the well-established centrist state tradition. Instead, these calls are framed solely as a technical issue about the effectiveness of an urban administration, rather than about comprehensive political and institutional reform. It is not accidental that during the militarist regime following the coup in 1980, important institutional reforms to metropolitan Istanbul were introduced as part of a larger agenda to establish order and to solve urgent infrastructural problems. What is striking is

that relative efficiency in solving urban matters were perceived by urbanites as 'democratisations'.

After all, the demands for decentralisation in Turkey run along two different strands: democratisation and efficiency. This is especially true with regards to urbanism, which oscillates between populism and authoritarian rule, two fundamental characteristics of the current political system. From this perspective, it is this dilemma in Istanbul that may be perceived as 'chaos'.

In this context, it is necessary to first explain the meaning of the current two-tier structure of Istanbul's urban administration. Both metropolitan and district municipalities have decision-making powers in so far that the metropolitan administration is responsible for macro-level decisions concerning the entire city, while districts are responsible for decisions related to traditional municipal services. The metropolitan administration of Istanbul, follows the 'powerful mayor and weak council' model, one which enables a wide and non-transparent space for macro-level decision-making and, not surprisingly, favours, the mayors of metropolitan municipalities. Therefore, city-wide decisions are discussed and criticised in the media and by professional associations only after they have been made, thus fuelling rumours and complaints about corruption, criticism on judicial and technical inadequacies, as well as the anti-democratic nature of the decision-making processes.

As with other cities that have grown rapidly and that urgently need solutions for their basic infrastructure problems, city-wide decisions to address the concerns of citizens are vitally important in Istanbul. However, since local administrations are not financially autonomous, they are engaged in a never-ending search for new resources to implement their decisions. Therefore, good relations with the

central government are crucial. In Istanbul, most problems have occurred when the political party of the metropolitan municipality differed from that of the central government. At first sight, it is impossible to talk about a central versus local conflict: On the one hand Istanbul's local administration and the central government in Ankara are politically aligned and share common political views. On the other hand, the Prime Minister was formerly the mayor of Istanbul, and considers himself as an 'Istanbul lover.' Finally, AKP's great success in local politics helped them to achieve success at the national level.

However, upon gaining power and its political advantages, the central AKP administration began turning down calls for decentralisation, and instead reinforced their centralist tendencies further. Thus when it comes to the making of macro-level decisions it is possible to say that the central government exerts a strong influence in Istanbul. Moreover, Istanbul's residents have generally supported decisions taken even by the central government because of their efficiency at the local level.

These non-transparent decisions can be criticised as they violate basic public administrative and democratic principles. The closed, communitarian and disciplined structure of the AKP with a charismatic leadership prevents issues from being discussed more openly. However, rumours about central versus local conflicts do exist, and, what's more, technical and legal deficiencies in these decisions are discussed among a limited number of professionals. Some of the decisions have been suspended by the legal authorities.

Paradoxically, Istanbulites do not seem to be very interested in how these decisions are made anyway. On the contrary, the fact that fundamental and urgent infrastructural problems are actually being addressed generates popular support. The Prime Minister, seems content that the public recognises and supports the central government's role in projects concerning the city's infrastructure. Indeed, these investments can be regarded as a reward for votes: and thus boost populist politics just like social relief for the poor citizens.

Considering this, it is possible to say that Istanbul is being governed by a populist approach closely tied to the central government. In this context, it may be necessary to point out how the city is currently planned. In short, a strategic planning ethos now guides the city's growth. Responsibility for this strategic vision has been transferred to the Istanbul Metropolitan Planning and Urban Design Centre (IMP), a new organisation that operates alongside political and bureaucratic bodies of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality. Although the staff of this new organisation possesses expertise, decision-making is still left to the domain of populist politics and projects of the IMP tend to be selectively or only partially implemented, because it does not have administrative and technocratic influence. To sum up, we may claim that the technocrats are excluded from the decision-making process where their knowledge and expertise are extremely important for the city's aesthetics and long-term growth.

On the other hand, the European Union's nomination process brings with it new influential concepts regarding urban governance. As a result, government bodies and civic groups are trying to identify new models for participation: local administrations have established city councils and are trying to foster stronger ties to civic groups in order to comply with legal obligations connected to these administrative principles.

In this respect, Istanbul's biggest obstacle is that the majority of its citizens are either not organised or take part in hierarchically structured 'community' groups. Possibilities for open participation remain limited but clientelist-ties become widespread. Another problem concerns the rights of organisations and the freedom of expression among social groups who suffer from the disadvantageous consequences of some urban renewal projects. For example, the Romani community, which used to live in the historical city centre, has been particularly marginalised. Overall, the administrative principle for enhanced governance currently relates only to the existing power groups and excludes the disadvantaged, the marginalised and minorities. However, thanks to Turkey's nomination to the European Union new concepts have been introduced concerning human and minority rights. Local democracy will arrive to Turkish cities only after it

is understood that populism and majority-rule do not equal democracy and that the demands of minority groups have to be taken into consideration.

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