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In defense of Şahin Alpay and a democratic Turkey

The arrest of journalist and political scientist Şahin Alpay marks a crucial moment in Turkish politics. President Erdoğan and his regime now openly attack the forces that have been at the forefront of the struggle for parliamentary democracy and the integration of Turkey into the European Union.

In his role as a political analyst and commentator Şahin Alpay has been crucial in the Turkish debate. Earlier this year he was silenced when the Government seized the Zaman newspaper. Now he has been arrested.

Şahin Alpay has been a dissenting voice in the secular and intellectual circles of Istanbul, to which he himself belongs. For a long time he maintained that the AKP party, with its popular base among Muslim believers and the growing small business in Anatolia, was better suited than the failing social democracy and the old elites to create a democratic Turkey. He hoped that the AKP would be able to limit the power of the military and open the way for Turkish EU membership. He conveyed the same message to his international readers through his weekly columns in English.

To his audience in the AKP party his message was that the process of change, which had been initiated by AKP and president Erdoğan, had to develop into a deepened democracy, a real peace agreement with the Kurds and full membership in the EU.

The basis for his criticism of Turkish politics is the defense of the fundamental principles of a democratic society. He has repeatedly written about a world where democracy, secularism (in the sense of freedom of religion and conscience for all), human rights and rule of law prevail. Then no one would be discriminated against on the basis of gender, race, ethnic origin, religious belief, disability or sexual orientation. In democratic societies conflicts are resolved not by violence or war, but through peaceful dialogue and negotiation.

He holds that the basic conflict in the world today is not between civilizations based on religion, for example between Islam and the West, but rather between the defenders of humanist civilization and its opponents.

At the same time he is very critical of the ignorant and schematic views of Turkey that he constantly finds in Western countries. He despises the Orientalism that looks down on and scorns the peoples of the rest of the world in general and Muslims in particular. He has said that his admiration for the principles and institutions of European integration

does not in any sense mean that he is oblivious to the fact that colonialism, racist, aggressive nationalism, secular fundamentalism, totalitarianism and anti-Semitism are also European products.

Şahin Alpay has become one of the most insightful and sharp opponents of the high-handedness of the Erdoğan regime. He takes a clear stance against the authoritarian secularism which has been fundamental to modern Turkey. He points to the root cause of problems: Turkey harbors multiple ethnic, religious and social cleavages and can only achieve peace and stability by developing into a liberal and pluralist democracy. He argues that the founding principles of the Republic of Turkey, despite revisions throughout the decades, do not allow this.

Recent events concerning the rule of law in Turkey led him to the bitter conclusion that the gravest failing of the Republic of Turkey, founded in 1923, is the inability to form elites committed to human rights, universal values and the rule of law. Those who embrace these ideals are either too few or do not dare to speak out. The majority chooses loyalty to those in power or to their own purely material interests.

In one of his last Zaman columns he claimed that the worsening of conditions in Turkish domestic and foreign politics was likely to continue. He concluded that the growing opposition by intellectuals and what remains of an independent media could eventually trigger a revolt against Erdoğan in the ranks of the AKP. This fear might explain Erdoğan's rage against academics, intellectuals and the independent media. That is exactly what Şahin Alpay himself has now fallen victim of.

Şahin Alpay came to Sweden as a political refugee and stayed here for several years. He was accepted to the doctoral program in political science at Stockholm University. His dissertation on Turks in Stockholm was published in 1980. This study was part of a larger research program focusing on the political resocialization of immigrants. Şahin Alpay was able to show how the Turkish immigrants were joined together by an intricate network of contacts but also how they interacted with Swedish society. He acquired detailed knowledge about how Turks view Swedes and how Swedes view Turks.

Later he said that he had arrived in Sweden as a Marxist, and left Sweden as a convinced liberal social democrat. He often jokes about Sweden for being the world's washing machine, taking in revolutionaries and turning out liberals.

We who write this article are not experts on Turkey but we have followed events in Turkey over the years. For us and many other political scientists and journalists in Europe Şahin Alpay is an invaluable guide to the understanding of Turkish society and politics. The more one learns about this country, its people, history and culture, the more convinced one becomes that Turkey should be part of the European community of democratic and open societies.

Şahin Alpay personalizes this bridge between Turkey and the rest of Europe. His family tree has roots in Greece and Macedonia. He is as home in Stockholm as he is in Istanbul. He is constantly working to improve the mutual understanding between Turkey and Europe.

To the President and Government of Turkey and to the Turkish Embassy in Stockholm, Sweden we have two simple demands:

Release Şahin Alpay immediately.

Grant Şahin Alpay and his colleagues full freedom of expression.

We write this appeal not only as friends and colleagues of Şahin Alpay. We also write as friends of an open and democratic Turkey with its future in Europe.

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