Opposition and Legitimacy in the Ottoman Empire

Conspiracies and political cultures

Florian Riedler

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Opposition and Legitimacy in the Ottoman Empire

This book looks at opposition to the Ottoman government in the second half of the nineteenth century, examining a number of key political conspiracies and how these relate to an existing political culture. In his detailed analysis of these conspiracies, the author offers a new perspective on an important and well researched period of Ottoman history.

A close reading of police records on five conspiracies offers the opportunity to analyse this opposition in great detail, giving special attention to the different groups of political actors in these conspiracies that often did not come from the established political elites. Florian Riedler investigates how their background of class and education, but also their individual life experiences influenced their aims and strategies, their political styles as well as their ways of thinking on political legitimacy. In contrast, the reaction of the authorities to these conspiracies reveals the official understanding of Ottoman legitimacy.

The picture that emerges of the political culture of opposition during the second half of the nineteenth century offers a unique contribution to our understanding of the great changes in the political system of the Ottoman Empire at the time. As such, it will be of great interest to scholars of Middle Eastern history, political history, and the Ottoman Empire.

Florian Riedler is a historian specialising in Ottoman history of the nineteenth century. His current research interests are social and urban history of the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly Istanbul, as well as the history of migration in the Ottoman Empire.

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Abbreviations

A.MKT.MHM = Bab-ı Ali Evrak Odası. Sadaret Evrakı. Mektubi Mühimme Kalemi, in BOA
A.MKT.NZD = Bab-ı Ali Evrak Odası. Sadaret Evrakı. Mektubi Kalemi. Nezaret ve Devair, in BOA
A.MKT.UM = Bab-ı Ali Evrak Odası. Sadaret Evrakı. Mektubi Kalemi. Umum Vilayat Kısmı, in BOA
BOA = Başbakanlık Osmalı Arşivi, Istanbul
İD = İrade Dahiliye, in BOA
FO = Foreign Office, in PRO
HH = Hatt-ı Hümayun, in BOA
HR.MTV = Hariciye Nezareti Evrakı. Mütenevvid Kısmı, in BOA
PRO = Public Record Office, London
Y.A.HUS = Sadaret Hususi Maruzat Evrakı, in BOA
Y.EE = Yıldız Esas Evrakı, in BOA

Contents

1 Introduction

Political culture of conspiracy

In a recent book Aykut Kansu attempted to re-establish the Young Turk revolution of 1908 as the decisive event at the beginning of modern Turkish history. In creating a democratic parliamentary system the revolution was much more significant than Mustafa Kemal's act of founding the Republic in 1923. As much as this reinterpretation was to correct our understanding of modern Turkish history, Kansu's criticism also was levelled against the common treatment of the late Ottoman period in historiography that disregarded 1908 as the decisive break and failed to assess its significance as a popular and democratic revolution. He singled out the focus on the state and its elites in mainstream scholarship as the reason for this misinterpretation. In this picture there was little place for dissenting voices, conflict or internal struggle over the fundamentals of the political system.[1]

This study will take up the issue of conflict and opposition in the late Ottoman Empire and therefore will examine in some detail a string of conspiracies against the Ottoman government during the Tanzimat era in the second half of the nineteenth century. Surprisingly, these conspiracies lack closer scholarly attention. If they were mentioned at all, the older literature has denounced them either as backwards looking or appreciated them only as forerunners of the Young Turks. In contrast, this study likes to examine them in their specific historical context rather than judging them in hindsight and see how they relate to existing Ottoman political culture of opposition. The findings will help establish an inventory of politically active groups in Ottoman society other than the state elites and they will reveal the contested issues in the Ottoman political system of the Tanzimat. The conflicting interpretations of the right way to order society between state and opposition, but also between different opposition groups, offer the opportunity to review Ottoman political culture and its development in the nineteenth century.

In the 1960s political scientists defined political culture in the framework of comparative research on democracy and democratic values in different societies. This study adopts a more neutral usage that assigns to the concept of political culture the role of balancing structural and systemic approaches to politics. Consequently, I will highlight the subjective factor in the analysis

of political processes and tend to give perceptions of the political actors a broader space. Although the concept of political culture is often criticised as particularly blurry, it helps to thematise at least two interrelated aspects of politics. The first is the importance of (often unconscious) fundamental norms defining a group's basic understanding of politics up to the point of what is political at all. In this sense political culture signifies a deeply embedded form of ideology that has its effect on political decisions, on thinking of legitimacy or authority and on the style of political action. The latter performative side is the second important aspect the concept of political culture calls attention to. When examining politics, rituals and symbols that are expressions of an aesthetics of political action have to be taken into account.[2]

A group's fundamental beliefs about politics also include the ways it deals with conflict in society. To capture this notion John Foran, a social scientist working on the causes and outcomes of revolutions (modern as well as historical), has coined the term 'political culture of opposition'.[3] The fundamental thinking of a group about opposition, its legitimacy and its proper forms, define this culture that is fed by a group's past experiences, its expectations and emotions as well as its subjective assessment of a political situation. In a political system with an established political culture of opposition revolutionary solutions of conflicts in society are said to be much more likely than in other political systems. Especially instructive for this study is Foran's application of the concept to the case of Iran.[4] He examines different forms of opposition movements in the nineteenth century such as tribal risings, tax revolts, religiously driven rebellions like the revolts of the Babis as well as the Tobacco boycott movement of the 1890s. His macro-sociological approach discerns the different classes of Iranian society that supported these movements, highlighting outside dependency as an agent of social change and as a cause for opposition. From the perspective of the Iranian constitutional movement of 1905–11 that established a modern political culture in Iran he classifies the earlier events as driven by a traditional or a transitional culture of opposition. It remains to be seen in how far these categories also make sense in the Ottoman case.

Scholars have used political culture to examine the roots and trajectories of revolutions regarding other historical contexts as well. Perhaps in the most innovative way this has been done in the case of eighteenth century France credited to be the founding moment of modern political culture per se. Above all the political culture of the French old regime has attracted attention as the laboratory of new political symbols and terms that developed in the framework of the absolute monarchy, ways of seeing and ordering society, and the development of forms of political contestation like the political press or parliamentarianism.[5]

In the case of Russia, research on the political culture in the 1917 revolution has only just begun. However, historians of nineteenth century Russia were well aware of the changes in the political culture mainly among

radical groups that gave rise to revolutionary activities and ideologies that went along with the delegitimisation of the old regime. In Russia the role of secret societies was particularly important in shaping pre-revolutionary political culture of opposition.[6]

Likewise in the Ottoman Empire we find an old regime that changed considerably during the nineteenth century, not least where its fundamental values, political arrangements and symbols were concerned. This study cannot claim to present an encompassing picture of nineteenth century Ottoman political culture. It will concentrate on one particular form of opposition, the conspiracy, that seems to be a natural outgrowth of any absolutist political system where there is no place for a loyal opposition. However, conspiracies can serve to thematise different aspects of Ottoman political culture in general and illustrate its development during the nineteenth century. Particularly through the main historical source on conspiracies, police records and similar documents produced by the prosecuting institutions of the Ottoman state, both the political culture of opposition, but also the political culture of the governing elite come into view.

Small-scale events like conspiracies that, compared to larger social movements of protest, consist of a limited number of participants direct the investigation in a specific direction. Individual motives and choices as well as the worldviews of the historical actors come to the foreground that otherwise would go unnoticed. This can add some important aspects to larger structural explanations of Ottoman politics. Here lies, I hope, the potential of the micro-historical approach offered here.

Moreover, the conspiracies investigated below also testify to the multiplicity of groups politically active in the nineteenth century Ottoman Empire. The study will ascertain which elements of Ottoman political culture they shared and on which fields their different interests and positions in the political system caused differences in their political behaviour.

The remainder of this chapter will introduce the main developments of the Ottoman political system as it formed in the first half of the nineteenth century, paying particular attention to the intertwined issues of power, legitimacy and political style. It is against the political culture of the ruling elites that oppositional culture of secret societies has to be placed. Some general remarks on opposition in Ottoman history and its historiography will conclude the introduction.

While the end of the nineteenth century political system that was destroyed by the victorious Young Turk revolutionaries is signified by 1908, there are at least two dates that are important for its inauguration. The dissolution of the janissary corps in 1826 by Sultan Mahmud II (1808–39) completed a first phase in a process of centralisation of power that is one of the constitutive elements of the nineteenth century Ottoman political system. Traditionally the janissaries of the capital could muster a decisive weight to tip the scales in favour of one or the other political faction. A very important group that could organise opposition to the decisions of the

central government and that had a long-standing and vital culture of opposition was thus gone. As a consequence the sultan unlike most of his immediate predecessors emerged as the sole source not only of political legitimacy but of real political power. He could start a programme of reform that was to define Ottoman history in the nineteenth century.

The rise of the civil bureaucracy as a powerful group in the Ottoman state apparatus was closely connected to this programme of centralisation and reform. In a long historical process that had already begun in the eighteenth century the civil bureaucracy (kalemiye, mülkiye), and especially the Sublime Porte with the grand vizier at its head, became an important and at times dominant power centre in the Ottoman political system of the nineteenth century.[7] This dominant position was expressed on different levels: in the creation of new ministries such as the ministry of interior or the foreign ministry that offered job opportunities to the officials from the civil bureaucracy; in the preponderance of institutions like the Sublime Porte over the palace or the army (its contenders in the Ottoman central administration) in determining the general political line of the empire; and last in the dominance individual politicians from the civil bureaucracy exercised over Ottoman politics.

Mustafa Reşid Pasha (1800–58) was the first of a string of influential politicians originating from the Translation office at the Sublime Porte who dominated Ottoman politics in the middle years of the nineteenth century. His disciples and successors as main representatives of the process of political reforms and modernisation were Mehmed Enim Âli (1815–71) and Keçecizade Mehmed Fuad (1815–69). Much of the power of this group of politicians rested on their know-how of diplomacy and their close relationship to the European powers that became increasingly important for the empire.

For historians the roughly four decades that the bureaucracy from the Porte dominated Ottoman politics serve as a further subdivision of the nineteenth century. This period known as the Tanzimat era begins with the proclamation of a famous reform edict in 1839 and ends either at the death of Âli Pasha in 1871 or alternatively with the accession to power of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876–1909).

From a general point of view the Tanzimat meant the continuation of the reforms initiated by Sultan Mahmud II. However, while before reforms had been closely connected to the person of the sultan and his reassertion of power, now they were in a sense generalised to become the official policy of the empire. Previous attempts were brought into a systematic framework, the scope of reforms was widened and new groups became their main supporters. It was the common goal of all the single steps and measures taken to render all branches of the governmental apparatus including the Ottoman army more centralised and professional. Additionally, the reforms aimed at creating a modern system of education and law more in tune with the needs of the state and its people. Most fundamentally, the relationship between

ruler and ruled, between the state and its subjects was concerned. All Ottoman subjects were to become more equal with each other and vis-à-vis the administration putting the state on a broader basis than before.

It is still an open question to what degree the Tanzimat not only affected the power relations between the different groups in the Ottoman state and altered the institutional structure, but also changed political culture. Scholars whose main interest is modern Turkey often attribute the non-democratic aspects of Turkish political culture to the negative effects of the Ottoman era. Indiscriminately they speak of one Ottoman political culture that is described as extremely state-centred and authoritarian.[8]

As has often been remarked, in such an authoritarian political culture there was no place for loyal opposition. All acts of opposition against the government were rebellions (isyan, fesad, fitne) notwithstanding the tradition of co-opting their leaders to government positions. The reason was the compound nature of Ottoman legitimacy that integrated religious elements and a patriarchal notion of authority.[9]

In the Ottoman political system the sultan from the Ottoman dynasty was the cornerstone of legitimacy. The office was the centre of a rich symbolism and many rituals of power had been arranged around it over the centuries. Especially on the occasion of the death of the old sultan and the enthronement of the new sultan these symbols and rituals came to be displayed. Questions of succession carried important political implications and irregularities inevitably resulted in the formation of political camps.[10]

After the seventeenth century most sultans had ceased to play an active political role, but they remained the ultimate arbiters between the political factions and local power-holders who effectively ran the country. Despite these changes the ideal image of an active and powerful ruler who was the guarantor of a just and well-ordered society remained a stock image of Ottoman political thought.[11]

Habituation and the antiquity of the dynasty became the main assets of the ruler in the face of their periodic loss of real political power which had never resulted in a formal redefinition of their authority. In the early nineteenth century local power-holders tried to gain official recognition of their role in the state. Mahmud II was forced to sign the so-called Deed of Alliance (Sened-i İttifak), which, however, remained a dead letter because the sultan would not have his role restricted.

Furthermore, the political elite of the Tanzimat never managed to alter the structure of authority in the political system. For example, it proved impossible for them to introduce a Westminster-style cabinet system that would have stabilised the government. The grand vizier as well as other ministers remained the absolute delegates (vekil-i mutlak) of the sultan, who could withdraw office at will.

The only thing that the political elite from the civil bureaucracy could do was to rid themselves of their traditional status as servants (kul) that gave their master, the sultan, not only power over their career and the right to

confiscate their wealth, but also legally sanctioned power over their life and death. All these prerogatives were abolished by decree in 1839.[12]

Therefore a recurring question in this study will be how different opposition groups viewed the role of the sultan and how this defined their aims and strategy.

Religion was closely entwined with the dynastic aspect as one important source of sultanic legitimacy. The continuous use the sultans made of such religious roles and titles as for example that of protector of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina or gazi, that is the conqueror of infidel lands added to the lands of Islam (dar ül-Islam), might serve as evidence for using religion as means for authority. Other titles such as Caliph were fully asserted only late in the nineteenth century, most vigorously by Sultan Abdülhamid II who was very consciously trying to manipulate the political culture of Sunni Muslims. This was particularly important in times when factual legitimacy flowing from the subject's prosperity and security were harder to attain, because of the constant decrease in power the empire suffered. Likewise symbols such as the standard of the Prophet, his mantle and sword still played an important role in the ritual of ascension of a new sultan. All sultans of the nineteenth century made use of these religious symbols and titles to support their authority. Sometimes this was done consciously; in most cases religious symbolism was a pervasive undercurrent.[13]

The reforms of the nineteenth century did not and could not touch on the position of the sultan; however, the prescribed changes questioned some other fundamentals of the state's legitimacy as far as it could be distinguished from that of its ruler. This mainly concerned the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in Ottoman state and society. In this regard the reform decree of 1839 itself bears witness to how the legal structure of the empire moved away from the traditional tenets entrenched in political culture. The decree singled out three fields on which the sultan's subjects could expect new regulations: their personal rights, the empire's system of taxation, as well as the military. The new sultan promised to respect and protect life, honour and property of all of his subjects, Muslims and non-Mulims alike, to introduce proportional taxation and abolish tax farms, as well as to restrict military service to five years.

The first of these promises in particular has drawn much attention from contemporary European commentators as well as modern scholars. The document has been interpreted as a decisive step away from traditional Ottoman legitimacy, giving up Muslim preponderance in favour of equality among the different religious groups of the empire.[14] At the same time it has to be acknowledged that regarding its rhetoric the decree remained a fairly conservative document. In its introduction it used the traditional theme of putting the empire's decline down to the non-observance of the sharia and the sultanic law (kanun). As a new twist in this old argument, though, this served as a justification to introduce new regulations resembling numerous reform proposals of the eighteenth century.[15] If there were indeed

a fundamental change in the basic legitimation, it constituted a long-term trend and was not primarily tied to the decree of 1839. In the decades before its promulgation there had already been very similar statements by Sultan Mahmud II, which can be understood in the framework of his paternalistic conception of office.[16] Only in the second half of the nineteenth century and particularly with the second of the great reform decrees of 1856 did this issue gain a new quality that made it a source for opposition as discussed in the Chapter 2.

Also other fundamentals of the Ottoman political system only changed slowly. While the legal system and the administration saw constant reform during the period, there were few new political institutions that could mediate the political process. Politics remained a prerogative of the elite in the centre; popular participation was at its beginnings and restricted to the participation of provincial elites in the newly founded administrative councils until a first Ottoman parliament was created in 1876.[17]

Constitutionalism was one of the new ideas discussed in the second half of the nineteenth century by Ottoman intellectuals and politicians. The study will ask how this idea was integrated in the conventional thinking on political authority and especially if and how it could become an ideology that fuelled opposition to the government.

In the second aspect of political culture, the style of politics, continuities were even stronger on the surface. As in previous centuries, day-to-day politics revolved around powerful individuals who were eligible for high offices in the centre. They built political factions around their households that were locked in constant struggle by the means of office intrigues, slandering and gossiping. These households had lost their earlier military power since Mahmud II had forbidden them to have a military retinue. Poets who were protected by influential politicians played an important role in the political struggle. In this sense also the great politicians of the civil bureaucracy, although they were associated with reform, rationalisation and rule of law, remained patron pashas par excellence. They were regularly criticised for their favouritism and arbitrary decisions by their contestants.[18]

The investigation below will show to what extent the conspiracies were still connected to this form of politics and to what degree they were offering their members other forms of expressing their political ideals.

The history of opposition in the Ottoman Empire is long and colourful. For modern historians instances of contestation like rebellions, revolts, mutinies, urban uprisings or conspiracies are important, because they offer alternative views on Ottoman history. Contestation exhibits the structures of power and the interests that supported Ottoman rule and make it seem less natural and god-given. It puts into perspective the monolithic picture of Ottoman political culture that contemporary chroniclers liked to display for their own reasons.[19]

Rarely has the political culture of opposition concept been used explicitly to analyse the rich history of Ottoman opposition and contestation.

While scholars in general have put questions of power in the foreground of their analysis, questions of legitimacy and political style have always attracted attention as well. The string of rebellions and mutinies that from the late sixteenth century onwards shook the empire have been a particular source of continuing interest and debate regarding their political and social causes and their significance for the development of the Ottoman state and its institutions. Scholars treated the frequent janissary mutinies, revolts of provincial governors and factional struggles in the capital of the post-classical age as examples of a crisis of the elites that resulted in political tensions on three levels: inside particular elite groups as manifest in factional struggle and rivalry between grandee households; between different elite groups over questions of who would have the ultimate decision regarding imperial policies; and, lastly, between established elites and rising groups that tried to change their status and participate in the privileges of the former.[20]

Structurally similar events of political crisis can be encountered in the eighteenth century when also other groups like ulema and the guilds of the capital came to play a significant role. Examples of the consistent patterns of political contestation are the so-called Edirne incident of 1703 as well as the Patrona Halil rebellion in 1730 and the rebellion of 1807 that ultimately brought Mahmud II to the Ottoman throne.[21]

Historians have made reform the main historiographic theme to analyse the instances of opposition and political contestation in the nineteenth century. In this perspective one of the main questions was in how far opposition meant opposition to the reforms and what vested interests were involved. In a historiographical tradition that saw the founding of the modern Turkish nation state in direct continuation of the reform programme of the nineteenth century there was a tendency to take the side of the Ottoman authorities and condemn such opposition. In this view above all the janissary corps on account of its involvement in the rebellions of 1807 and 1826 was blamed as the ultimate obstacle to progress in Ottoman society.

In a more neutral fashion other instances of opposition to reform have also been examined. The uprisings in the Balkans in the decade after the empire's tax system was reformed in 1839 serve as an example for material interests that, when threatened, could become a trigger for opposition. While landowners and tax farmers defended the old tax system, peasants rebelled to obtain the promises made to them. In the end the peasants' labour duties were abolished, however, the Ottoman government had to pull back on its plans to end the system of tax farming, because the new system proved inefficient. In the relevant decree issued in 1841 it continued its strategy to wrap reforms in a conservative language highlighting the importance of the sharia for the empire.[22]

Other examples for opposition against measures of the Tanzimat come from the Arab provinces of the empire. Regarding the riots in Aleppo in 1850, in Mosul in 1854, in Nablus in 1856 and most seriously in Damascus in 1860 scholars have identified an amalgamation of different reasons as