

Association for Political and Legal Anthropology

The section of the American Anthropological Association committed to critical study of politics and law

Is it Over? On the Melancholy of Lost Hope

By Jennifer Curtis / May 11, 2017 / PoLAR, Series / Leave a comment

By [Oguz Alyanak](https://anthropology.artsci.wustl.edu/alyanak_oguz) (https://anthropology.artsci.wustl.edu/alyanak_oguz) and [Funda Ustek-Spilda](http://www.gold.ac.uk/sociology/staff/ustek-fundal) (<http://www.gold.ac.uk/sociology/staff/ustek-fundal>)

In response to Turkey's constitutional referendum on April 16, 2017, which replaces the parliamentary system with an executive presidency, PoLAR and APLA commissioned a [series of responses from scholars and activists](http://wp.me/P1SS1c-1ih) (<http://wp.me/P1SS1c-1ih>) working on democracy and human rights in the region. In this installment, [Oguz Alyanak and Funda Ustek-Spilda](http://wp.me/p1SS1c-1m0) (<http://wp.me/p1SS1c-1m0>), [Deniz Yonucu](http://wp.me/p1SS1c-1IW) (<http://wp.me/p1SS1c-1IW>), and [William Garriott](http://wp.me/p1SS1c-1IT) (<http://wp.me/p1SS1c-1IT>) reflect on the ramifications of the referendum.



gettyimages

NurPhoto | NurPhoto

(<http://www.gettyimages.com/event/protest-referendum-result-in-turkey-700038383?et=ppbVX7ghOLZN7taW7wRiiA&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fapla.org.wordpress.com%2F%3Fp%3D5208%26preview%3Dtrue#ballot-papers-burning-are-pictured-on-april-20-2017-in-istanbul-the-picture-id671245662>)

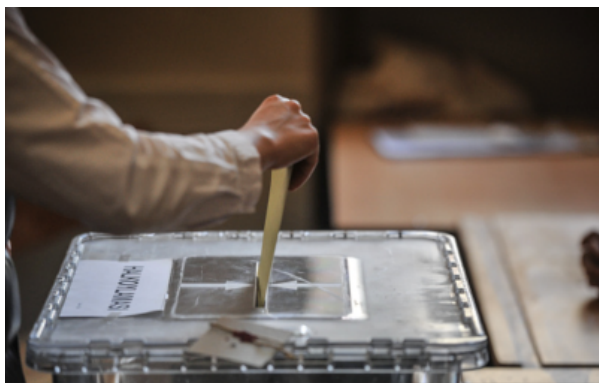
Photo by Erhan Demirtas/NurPhoto via Getty Images. Ballot papers burning are pictured on April 20, 2017 in Istanbul, Turkey during the protesters march in opposition to perceived voting irregularities in Sunday's constitutional referendum.

"Our people made a choice and approved the constitutional changes. The debate is *over*. So are days of post-election uncertainty. It is time to move on," argued the Turkish President Erdoğan in his post-Referendum address in the Turkish capital.

But is the debate, really, over?

Hours into the referendum, the Supreme Electoral Council of Turkey (YSK) allowed the [inclusion of voting slips and envelopes](https://politicalandlegalanthro.org/2017/04/27/the-seals-of-the-constitutional-referendum-in-turkey/) (<https://politicalandlegalanthro.org/2017/04/27/the-seals-of-the-constitutional-referendum-in-turkey/>) without official stamps to the vote count, which was a violation of Article 98 of the Electoral Law. In its commentary published a week later, the YSK stood behind its decision, arguing that "the conditions for an absolute illegality were not met" and that a constituent's vote could not be annulled simply because of a mistake committed by the ballot box supervisors. What they meant by the term, "absolute illegality" [*tam kanunsuzluk*] remains a mystery. Were conditions for a partial illegality met, for example?

According to the opposition, the conditions were met indeed. The YSK's decision helped whitewash a systematic electoral fraud that helped the Justice and Development Party (AKP) secure a victory, which, the opposition argued, would otherwise not be attainable. Accordingly, of the approximately 50 million votes casted in the Referendum, at least 2.5 million were claimed to be fraudulent. [Images](https://www.artigercek.com/suruc-ta-yirtilmis-hayir-oylari-bulundu) (<https://www.artigercek.com/suruc-ta-yirtilmis-hayir-oylari-bulundu>) from Turkey's conflict-torn South East surfaced with "No" votes lying around in the basement of an abandoned building. In some districts, block voting claims surged as the "Yes" votes appeared mysteriously high despite the usual political constituencies of these districts. Elsewhere, [videos](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/18/world/europe/turkey-referendum-is-haunted-by-allegations-of-voter-fraud.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/18/world/europe/turkey-referendum-is-haunted-by-allegations-of-voter-fraud.html>) circulated on social media in the hours and days following the



gettyimages Getty Images News | Getty Images

([http://www.gettyimages.com/event/turkey-holds-a-referendum-on-significant-constitutional-amendments-700034348?](http://www.gettyimages.com/event/turkey-holds-a-referendum-on-significant-constitutional-amendments-700034348?set=vpLTOjtMOoNf9b9577R1yw&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Faplaorg.wordpress.com%2F%3Fp%3D5208%26preview%3Dtrue#turkeys-president-recep-tayyip-prepares-to-make-a-statement-on-april-picture-id669176362)

[et=vpLTOjtMOoNf9b9577R1yw&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Faplaorg.wordpress.com%2F%3Fp%3D5208%26preview%3Dtrue#turkeys-president-recep-tayyip-prepares-to-make-a-statement-on-april-picture-id669176362](http://www.gettyimages.com/event/turkey-holds-a-referendum-on-significant-constitutional-amendments-700034348?set=vpLTOjtMOoNf9b9577R1yw&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Faplaorg.wordpress.com%2F%3Fp%3D5208%26preview%3Dtrue#turkeys-president-recep-tayyip-prepares-to-make-a-statement-on-april-picture-id669176362))

Yusame Ari/Getty Images. ISTANBUL, TURKEY – APRIL 16: A woman casts her ballot at a polling station during a referendum in Istanbul, April 16, 2017 Turkey. Millions of Turks are heading to polls to vote on a set of 18 proposed amendments to the Constitution of Turkey. A 'Yes' vote would grant President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who seeking to replace Turkey's parliamentary system, executive powers.

referendum, showing ballot box supervisors meddling with the results.

We believe that despite attempts to close this case, the debate is far from over. And so is our hope, which, we argue, persists in subtle ways.

When the polls closed on April 16, a sound wave of clanking casseroles filled the streets of many Turkish cities. People walked out of their homes and occupied the streets despite State of Emergency rules outlawing public assembly. The protestors mobilized under the hashtag #HayirBizKazandik/#NoWeWon, and the protests continued on for several days. The manner in which the protests were initiated was a shout out to the Gezi Park Protests of 2013, where the opponents of Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) took over the urban land-and-soundscape of Turkey. The protests over the referendum result were perhaps too subtle for the international media to pick up, but they were still there to remind us that this was not a lost battle. The margin was tight; 51 percent "Yes" v. 49 percent "No" votes, and the potentially fraudulent 2.5 million votes could alter the cursor's direction. Hence there was ample reason to make some noise.



gettyimages AFP | BULENT KILIC

([http://www.gettyimages.com/event/protest-referendum-result-in-turkey-700038383?](http://www.gettyimages.com/event/protest-referendum-result-in-turkey-700038383?set=ppbVX7ghOLZN7taW7wRiiA&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Faplaorg.wordpress.com%2F%3Fp%3D5208%26preview%3Dtrue#ballot-papers-burning-are-pictured-on-april-20-2017-in-istanbul-the-picture-id671245662)

[et=ppbVX7ghOLZN7taW7wRiiA&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Faplaorg.wordpress.com%2F%3Fp%3D5208%26preview%3Dtrue#ballot-papers-burning-are-pictured-on-april-20-2017-in-istanbul-the-picture-id671245662](http://www.gettyimages.com/event/protest-referendum-result-in-turkey-700038383?set=ppbVX7ghOLZN7taW7wRiiA&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Faplaorg.wordpress.com%2F%3Fp%3D5208%26preview%3Dtrue#ballot-papers-burning-are-pictured-on-april-20-2017-in-istanbul-the-picture-id671245662))

Bulent Kilic / AFP / Getty Images. Supporters of the "No" march at Besiktas to submit their petition calling for the annulment of a referendum that approved sweeping constitutional changes boosting President Erdoğan's powers, claiming blatant vote-rigging had swung the result, on April 18, 2017 in Istanbul.

The state's response was swift. Quickly came a new law that invented a new crime for engaging in "propaganda about the illegitimacy of the 'Yes' result", followed by a string of detentions. Erdoğan tolerated little time to discuss, let alone, digest the sweeping changes that were hastily enforced. The debate was not over, but the polity wanted to ensure that it was.

This is why our reflections on Turkey these days are shaped by a lingering sense of helplessness and hopelessness. As Hannah Arendt writes in the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, the "true goal of totalitarian propaganda is not persuasion, but organization of the polity... What convinces masses are not facts, and not even invented facts, but only the consistency of the system of which they are presumably part."

The consistency of debates being declared "over" without any time or need for explanation and/or clarification, as well as the sidelining and suppression of all voices of dissent and criticism bring forth a sense of detachment and hopelessness. Why care, when all hope is lost for our belief in change? A large part of our pessimism has to do with how little space we have to think and act outside of President Erdoğan's and his AKP's gaze. It also has to do with how little opportunity we create for ourselves to think beyond the discursive boundaries manifested by those in power. Columns in scholarly blogs, such as this one, offer spaces for critical discourse, but we know that they might come at a hefty price to its authors. And even then, it often remains limited in its reach.



([http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/photo/taksim-gezi-park-protests-in-istanbul-high-res-stock-photography/583651452?](http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/photo/taksim-gezi-park-protests-in-istanbul-high-res-stock-photography/583651452?et=71djYr_T_RgWSIC5GndjA&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Faplaorg.wordpress.com%2F%3Fp%3D5208%26preview%3Dtrue)

[et=71djYr_T_RgWSIC5GndjA&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Faplaorg.wordpress.com%2F%3Fp%3D5208%26preview%3Dtrue](http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/photo/taksim-gezi-park-protests-in-istanbul-high-res-stock-photography/583651452?et=71djYr_T_RgWSIC5GndjA&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Faplaorg.wordpress.com%2F%3Fp%3D5208%26preview%3Dtrue))
 Photo by Ali Kabas / Getty Images. Ataturk monument covered with flags during Taksim Gezi Park protests, Istanbul, Turkey.

In a rather gloomy [column \(https://politicalandlegalanthro.org/2017/05/03/the-complicity-of-hope/\)](https://politicalandlegalanthro.org/2017/05/03/the-complicity-of-hope/) on the Turkish referendum, Ayşe Parla asked whether the “No”-sayers had themselves become hostages through their belief in a false hope. Why be complicit in hope? Why remain hopeful, especially when the final arbiter, the President, had long spoken his concluding words? For those of us who have nothing else but hope to ponder on, a critique of hope comes as a sinister blow to our very lifeline. The belief in hope, as Parla argues, keeps other alternatives out of sight. And she is right. We should have, by now, learned our lesson not to be hopeful for structural changes after having been let down so many times in the preceding years and by the consistency of how fast important debates were closed or got lost in the immediacy of other issues in Turkey’s political agenda.

A critique of hope is a productive intellectual exercise. And Parla’s scholarly intervention is an excellent illustration of it. But so is reflexively engaging with our hopelessness. Losing hope in hope itself risks leaving us to wallow in apathy. While we are not here to offer an appraisal of hope, or celebrate a false hope, we would like to be mindful of the possibilities for alternative kinds of protest, which continue to take place in Turkey (such as a ongoing boycott against a dairy giant, whose CEO had a verbal confrontation with the No-sayers), albeit in small scale and disconnected forms. Raising our voices internationally is but one thing we can do.



([http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/photo/taksim-gezi-park-](http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/photo/taksim-gezi-park-protests-in-istanbul-high-res-stock-photography/583666868?et=Pybe_tzzRiBCbNgcSmu2Hw&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Faplaorg.wordpress.com%2F%3Fp%3D5208%26preview%3Dtrue)

[protests-in-istanbul-high-res-stock-photography/583666868?](http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/photo/taksim-gezi-park-protests-in-istanbul-high-res-stock-photography/583666868?et=Pybe_tzzRiBCbNgcSmu2Hw&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Faplaorg.wordpress.com%2F%3Fp%3D5208%26preview%3Dtrue)
[et=Pybe_tzzRiBCbNgcSmu2Hw&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Faplaorg.wordpress.com%2F%3Fp%3D5208%26preview%3Dtrue](http://www.gettyimages.com/detail/photo/taksim-gezi-park-protests-in-istanbul-high-res-stock-photography/583666868?et=Pybe_tzzRiBCbNgcSmu2Hw&referrer=https%3A%2F%2Faplaorg.wordpress.com%2F%3Fp%3D5208%26preview%3Dtrue))
 Ali Kabas/Getty Images. Young man wearing anonymous mask and buses destroyed during Taksim Gezi Park protests, Istanbul, Turkey.

The post-referendum Turkey bears stark differences to the Turkey of Gezi Park protests, which found significantly more coverage in international media and academic scholarship, and had a more hopeful tone to them than what we see today. But giving up hope in and on Turkey does not help. In the words of Arendt again, for “nothing perhaps illustrates the general disintegration of political life better than this vague, perhaps hatred of everybody and everything without a focus for its passionate attention, with nobody to make responsible for the state of affairs (...). It consequently turned in all directions, haphazardly and unpredictably, incapable of assuming an air of healthy indifference towards anything under the sun.”

For some, not giving up hope might at best be wishful thinking, especially under the draconian measures of the State of Emergency rule perpetually being extended and where ruling by decree has become the norm rather than the exception. Yet, it should not mean becoming indifferent, but instead, all the more a reason for devising new platforms for “making

some noise” (<https://politicalandlegalanthro.org/2017/04/27/divided-by-democracy-reflections-on-the-turkish-referendum-from-the-top/>). As Jennifer Curtis aptly notes (<https://politicalandlegalanthro.org/2017/05/03/disappearing-democracies/>), a democratic system requires more than vigilance (or hope, for that matter). It requires participation. This is because action and participation are animating features of democracy. Even when the very underpinnings of democracy are distorted and its institutional and legal protection is undermined—as we witness today in Turkey—it is still taking action and participating in action that can help preserve, defend and re-assert democracy. No matter how small, subtle and dispersed resistances we might see, we hold them crucially important not for just being courageous enough for raising our voice, but for their *practicing of hope* for democracy.



*Oguz Alyanak (https://anthropology.artsci.wustl.edu/alyanak_oguz) is a PhD candidate in sociocultural anthropology and a McDonnell scholar at Washington University in St. Louis. His fieldwork in Strasbourg, funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation, was on moral anxieties pertaining to Muslim Turkish men's going out habits. He writes a column on Turkey for *Anthropology News* (<http://www.anthropology-news.org/>).*

(<http://www.gold.ac.uk/sociology/staff/ustek-funda/>)

Funda Ustek-Spilda (<http://www.gold.ac.uk/sociology/staff/ustek-funda/>) is a Postdoctoral Researcher on the ARITHMUS research project “Peopling Europe: How data make a people” at Goldsmiths, University of London. She obtained her doctorate in Sociology from the

University of Oxford & St. Cross College. She writes on missing people in official statistics, particularly with respect to labor, migration and gender.



About Jennifer Curtis

Jennifer Curtis is an Honorary Fellow in Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh:
http://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/staff/social_anthropology/curtis_jennifer.

[View all posts by Jennifer Curtis →](#)

[Blog at WordPress.com.](#)