‘No Virus Is Stronger than Our Unity’

Shifting Forms of Governmental Intimacies during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT: This article analyses how governments have sustained their relationship with their citizens amidst pandemic restrictions brought about by coronavirus through a focus on the acts of the Turkish government. Specifically, by looking at presidential letters addressed to the nation as well as the government’s fundraising campaign, I demonstrate how the Turkish state tried to manage a public health crisis and govern the collective body at once. In doing so, I argue that letters, by serving as both tokens of gratitude to the people and reminders of their patriotic duties, were a powerful political tool used both to re-establish the governmental intimacy between the state and its citizens that was disrupted as a result of pandemic restrictions and to assuage the repercussions of a possible political crisis.

KEYWORDS: affect, COVID-19, gift exchange, letter writing, state, Turkey

How do governments manage the relationship they have established with their constituents during a public emergency that obstructs direct contact with and access to the public? In countries where the direction of citizens’ lives are intimately tied to and are at the whim of those who tightly grasp governmental power, the answer to this question can manifest itself in creative ways. Ever since Turkey’s first coronavirus case was officially confirmed in mid-March, Turkish TV channels have witnessed a relative absence in their daily broadcast stream: the figure of the country’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Through his frequent speeches to the nation, Erdoğan occupies a sizeable presence in the daily lives of the country’s citizens. With the advent of pandemic restrictions, hence the absence of public events through which to address the nation, Erdoğan’s relationship with the citizens took on an epistolary form. Within the span of mere weeks, from April to May, households in Turkey received two letters from the president. The first one arrived for the ‘elderly’ citizens (those aged

65 and above who were placed under a now partially eased curfew in late March), and was hand-delivered to individual recipients in the form of a gift, packaged with the seal of the Office of the Presidency, alongside a bottle of disinfectant cologne and sanitary face masks. The second letter was sent to all households to celebrate Eid al-Fitr, a religious holiday that marks the end of Ramadan, which Turkey, a predominantly Muslim country, spent under lockdown due to pandemic restrictions. In both letters, Erdoğan detailed the Turkish nation’s success in combating the pandemic and urged citizens to do their part in helping the country to ward off the virus. Having previously asked for the people’s assistance in managing a public and political crisis as well through text messages sent to 68 million mobile phones in the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt (Mortimer 2016), Erdoğan in this instance quite literally entered the homes of all Turkish citizens through his correspondence.

In a country where the government holds sizeable control over the majority of public expression outlets

and actively uses them to promote pro-government messages and curtail opposition politics, it would be easy to dismiss these letters as yet another form of populist propaganda. I, instead, suggest that they are much more than that. By attending to this governmental correspondence, as well as other official proclamations produced during COVID-19, this article demonstrates how the Turkish state dealt with a public health emergency and governed the collective body at once by seeking ways to re-establish the governmental intimacy between the state and its citizens that was disrupted through pandemic restrictions. In doing so, my analysis aims to contribute to the body of anthropological literature that brings studies on affect into conversation with analyses of the state (cf. Laszczkowski and Reeves 2017; Navaro-Yashin 2012). In particular, I do this by re-emphasising the value of analysing letters as ethnographic objects (Ahearn 2001) and as political tools that hold the potential to generate emotions and regulate societal behaviour. In the Turkish case, letters act as a means for the government to reinvigorate the social contract between the state and the people, both serving as a gift of appreciation and a reminder of collective obligations. Finally, this article examines how the Turkish state materialised in its citizens' daily lives during a period of restricted access to the people through urgent appeals that foreground patriotic emotions and calls on the affective mobilisation of citizens to manage a public health crisis and thus avert a political one at the same time.

Gifting as a Patriotic Duty

Shortly before the arrival of the first governmental letter to households across Turkey, the country's president announced that he was initiating a public fundraising campaign called 'We Are Enough for Each Other Turkey' (*Biz Bize Yeteriz Türkiyem*) to alleviate the economic impacts of coronavirus. Through a single SMS to the designated coronavirus 'hotlines', each participating person would be able to contribute ten Turkish liras (approximately two US dollars) to the crowdfunded aid pool to help those financially impacted as a result of furloughs or terminations that happened due to the pandemic. On his tweet dated 30 March 2020, in which he announced the inauguration of the campaign, Erdoğan, putting the nation and religion front and centre, declared: 'Together with our nation, with whom we have braced much hardship and waged many struggles, and with the help and mercy of our Lord, we will, God willing, defeat this calamity,

because #WeAreEnoughforEachOtherTurkey'. As a political gesture, Erdoğan announced that he would also be donating seven months' worth of his salary to the so-called 'National Solidarity Campaign' [*Milli Dayanışma Kampanyası*], which he presented as his gift to the nation (Habertürk 2020).

As sociologist and anthropologist Marcel Mauss (2000) has shown us, giving gifts forms a bond between the giver and the receiver, thus creating a relationship of exchange. This, in essence, means that there is no such thing as a free gift, as each act of giving needs to be reciprocated. Gift-giving is also a political act (regardless of whether or not the act itself takes place within the official domain of politics), creating demands and obligations. Therefore, gift exchanges may, and often do, acquire a meaning beyond the personal, especially in societal contexts as fraught and polarized as they are in Turkey, producing a range of affective responses from the exchanging parties and their observers (Yalçın-Heckmann 2019). The political nature of gift-giving during COVID-19, for instance, can be observed in Erdoğan's global shipment of medical supplies to countries in need, which was featured prominently in pro-government media outlets (TRT World 2020). As political scientist Yaprak Gürsoy (2020), in her analysis of these shipments, has also noted, the gifting of medical supplies, packaged with the logo of the Turkish presidency and sent alongside letters from Erdoğan to the respective heads of states, was a 'rare opportunity' for the president to bolster his (and hence the country's) status and power both at home and abroad.

Given the intricate social entanglements that gift-giving produces, Erdoğan's supposedly selfless act of generosity in bestowing his salary to the needs of the nation actually serves as a reminder to the people about not only the state's expectation, but more importantly the demand from the collective body to reciprocate the president's 'gift' and do their part to address a public health crisis. This demand is evident, for instance, in the way the fundraising campaign was publicised to Turkish citizens living abroad. On their tweet dated 6 April 2020, the Turkish Embassy in Australia announced the campaign by stating that 'we are awaiting the contributions of our valued citizens in Australia [to the campaign]', and this was accompanied with the slogan 'Now is the time to lend a hand to our nation, the time to support our government!' (Oda TV 2020). Through this call, citizens were reminded of their patriotic 'duty' to serve and pay back the nation – a manifestation of the notion of indebtedness that marks the relationship between the state and citizens in Turkey (Yoltar 2020). Despite

the voicing of public criticism against the campaign (especially in light of the irony of seeking donations domestically while at the same time 'gifting' aid abroad), it looks like people, both in and outside of the country, did, indeed, heed the call. As of June 2020, the total amount of donations to the campaign via SMS alone exceeded 66 million Turkish liras (approximately 9.6 million US dollars), with the campaign still gaining public traction (A Haber 2020).

Letters as Acts of Gratitude and Mobilisation

Juxtaposed with the theatricality of the fundraising campaign, Erdoğan's letters to the nation may, on the surface, be simply read as an effort to manage the collective body during a crisis, including its movements and everyday activities. Indeed, the letters include Erdoğan's plea to the people to be responsible citizens, abide by the rules put forth by the authorities, practice social distancing, maintain hygiene practices and stay indoors. I would argue, however, that the letters, more importantly, are a tribute to the purported success of the Turkish nation in addressing the impacts of the virus, which is arguably Erdoğan's version of showing accountability to the people in demonstrating that their contributions to the campaign have made a difference to their fellow citizens. This is perhaps why, unlike other examples of pandemic management techniques across the globe where some nation-states had a particular focus on monitoring the intimate lives of their citizens – in Indonesia, for instance, government authorities, concerned about a post-pandemic baby boom, implored 'dads' to 'please control yourself' and have sex using contraception (Paddock and Sijabat 2020) – the Turkish president's epistolary suggestions to the nation are surprisingly non-intimate, contrary to Erdoğan's frequent pre-pandemic plea to Turkish couples to have 'at least three children' (Erten 2015). Instead, the president's letters are, in essence, a written version of his speeches addressing the nation, kindling patriotic emotions and serving as motivational narratives that convey and encourage pride in the Turkish national identity. Through mention of Turkey's aid of medical supplies sent abroad, Erdoğan's Eid letter, for instance, offers a bold critique of international politics by stating that 'in a world where global solidarity is much talked about without any actual demonstration of it, we, as Turkey, have shown our humanity [by helping other countries]' (CNN Türk 2020).

It is then no surprise that the timing of Erdoğan's letters to the nation promptly followed the inauguration of the National Solidarity Campaign. The letters were not just a medium to reach the people in an environment where other means of outreach may have failed, but more importantly, they were tokens of appreciation and encouragement. In an age of pervasive technology, a letter may seem like an unusual choice to be selected by a government as a method of patriotic communication with its citizens, given the arguably more impactful and popular option that is social media. Yet, unlike emails or text messages, which can be ignored or easily deleted with the push of a button, or a speech on TV, which can be deliberately skipped or even missed while channel surfing, letters are tactile objects that force a physical and obligatory presence in the life of the recipient. Letters, like gifts, are deeply generative of emotions and result in an affective reaction on the part of the receiver. This is precisely why I would argue that, in light of Erdoğan's usage of letters as a strategic tool to manage a public health crisis that holds the potential to upend national sentiment, they are also a 'cultural product of nationalism' (Anderson 2006: 141) imbued with emotion. Indeed, the content of the letters express the president's love for the nation and calls on the people to reciprocate that love through national solidarity and mobilisation – both in spirit and in kind. Through these letters that foreground patriotic emotion, Erdoğan not only bolsters the power of the presidency, but also acknowledges the significant role of the responsible citizen in upholding the state and national values.

Conclusion

How do nation-states encourage citizens to embrace their national identities during times of crises that may test the very emotions that states rely on for their continued existence? The advent of coronavirus, with the way it has stretched already thin human resources, emotional and material alike, has manifested in numerous ways the responses to this question given by nation-states across the globe. In Turkey's case, I have argued that the state has striven to sustain governmental intimacies through two primary ways: gift-giving and letter-writing, both of which were deeply entangled in politics. It is, of course, difficult to gauge what sort of an impact these state acts had on their target audience, the citizens themselves, as pandemic restrictions have turned the possibility of conducting field research amongst

people into an impossible luxury. Nevertheless, in the absence of our regular ethnographic tools, being attentive to the written word can provide us with a glimpse into people's daily lives and the operations of state power. Under these circumstances, despite the public criticism of his actions, Erdoğan's governmental management techniques seem to still have kept alive the relationship between the state and the people as well as help him come out of a public crisis politically unscathed, at least for the moment.

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