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Politics of anticipation: Turkey's 2017 Constitutional Referendum and the Local 'No' Assemblies in Istanbul

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ABSTRACT

This article engages with the question of coordinating action during transitional and politically volatile times, in high-stakes situations. More specifically, I look at a local assembly that was established to campaign for the 'no' vote against regime change in the 2017 constitutional referendum in Turkey, and how it disintegrated at a time when coordinated action was perceived as the only viable strategy by the participants. Based on participant-observation and ethnographic interviews, I argue that instead of framing or strategy, differences in temporal frameworks eroded the basis on which activists usually coordinated their next steps, leading to an unresolvable mismatch in their anticipation of future events, and therefore, in action. I characterize the temporal dynamics of political contestation in such contexts as a 'politics of anticipation,' where futurity and temporality themselves become subjects of political contention. As such, this article contributes to the study of anti-authoritarian social movements, studies of time and temporality, and to the sociology of time and the future.

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Introduction

On 15 July 2016, part of the Turkish military attempted a coup d'état and met with popular resistance, creating fertile ground for the governing Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) to reestablish its control over the state and reconfigure the political landscape. On 20 July 2016, the government declared a state of emergency, later extended seven times, that initiated a two-year-long rule by decrees with the force of law, which served to sidestep the parliament, eliminate the opposition by way of criminalizing it, curtail civil and political rights and freedoms, and grant the executive unchecked powers. During this period, a constitutional referendum was held on 16 April 2017 to institutionalize the de facto authoritarian regime, which the general and presidential elections on 24 June 2018 further legitimized. The interval between the 2016 coup attempt and the 2018 elections thus witnessed the acceleration of the transition to authoritarianism in Turkey, along with resistance to regime change and mobilization against the authoritarian transition.

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Uncertainties around political rights and freedoms abounded during this transitory period. Some of these uncertainties regarded the continuation of electoral politics, the freedom of assembly and association, and the safety of those in the opposition in case of a potential ‘downfall’ of the president or the ruling party. These questions created a sense of anxiety among the opposition over the loss of hard-won rights and freedoms. These uncertainties and anxieties are not peculiar to Turkey, but are observable in other cases of de-democratization, authoritarianism, and varieties of right-wing populism around the world, from the United States to Poland to Brazil to Hungary.

Against this global background of authoritarian tendencies, this article looks at the influence of Turkey’s accelerated authoritarian transition on grassroots anti-authoritarian resistance and mobilization. Broadly, it engages with the question of coordinating action during transitional and politically volatile times, in high-stakes situations. Specifically, it examines the dissolution of the local ‘no’ assemblies that were established in Istanbul to campaign for the ‘no’ vote in the 2017 constitutional referendum. The article explores the temporal dynamics of social movements and aims at expanding social movement analysis to cover anticipation and future projections as a fundamental dimension of political action. Drawing on ethnographic data, the article identifies several key temporal dynamics of movement trajectories and offers the term ‘politics of anticipation’ to refer to the specifically temporal aspects of political contestation. The politics of anticipation encapsulates both the futurity inherent in politics as well as political contestation over the future itself. As such, this study contributes to social movement studies, the emerging ‘sociology of the future’ (Mische, 2009), and to our understanding of the challenges that grassroots movements face in the context of authoritarian transitions.

The referendum and the assemblies

The 2017 constitutional referendum took place under the emergency rule issued after the coup attempt in 2016. Regional states of emergency were common after the end of the ‘peace process’ in 2015 in the Kurdish provinces (Arslanalp & Erkmen, 2020), but the nation-wide emergency rule between 2016 and 2018, where the government ruled by decrees with the force of law, legitimized constitutional change. The referendum put to vote eighteen amendments to the constitution that would abolish the post of prime minister, remove the parliament’s right to initiate a motion of no confidence, give the president the power to appoint the cabinet, and allow the president to be affiliated with a political party. The referendum officially passed with a 51.41% vote in favour. The amendments transformed the political system in Turkey from a parliamentary to a presidential system with no checks and balances and with significant powers granted to the executive. Given Turkey’s tradition of authoritarian constitutionalism (Işıkse, 2013), I consider the most recent changes as constitutionalizing regime change, and not simply amendments to the political system.

Within this context of authoritarian transition, the ‘no’ assemblies were launched by local organizers in February 2017 in response to the government’s declaration of the referendum. Their immediate aim was to campaign for the ‘no’ vote in the referendum, but they quickly evolved into a political project that viewed the assemblies as potentially long-lasting, self-organized political formations based on popular participation. The

organizers were leftist or socialist activists, some of whom were members of political parties or organizations. The participants were also predominantly left-leaning individuals and former or current members of political parties, although there were many participants who voted for the mainstream opposition party, the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP), and people who simply disapproved of the AKP and/or President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The assemblies were a result of the experiences gained by the numerous experiments in local organizing since the 2013 Gezi protests, and were inspired by the idea and structure of the Peoples' Democratic Congress (Halkların Demokratik Kongresi, HDK). Assemblies were organized on the principles of non-hierarchy/horizontalism, inclusivity, decentralization, and a decision-making process very closely modelled after consensus. Soon after their initiation, there were over thirty assemblies in different districts of Istanbul.

I was a participant-observer at one of the first-formed and largest local 'no' assemblies for almost a year, from its inception to its dissolution.¹ I also conducted 46 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with activists within and outside of the assemblies. This article is predominantly based on my field notes from December 2017 and January 2018, concentrating on a series of meetings that marked the dissolution of the assembly. This assembly was well-attended during the referendum campaign, it was a model for other assemblies, and it mobilized week-long protests that declared the rigged referendum illegitimate. Hence, the disintegration of this assembly in January 2018 was both significant and unexpected, as it happened at a time when the possibility of an early election was being discussed, and when all its participants agreed that the best strategy was to keep the assemblies alive and coordinate action against an increasingly authoritarian future.

Given that the environmental, organizational, and ideological conditions amenable to collaboration (Van Dyke & McCammon, 2010) were present, I ask, why and how did this successful grassroots organization disintegrate at the time that it did? With this question, I examine the dynamics of coordinating action under increasingly repressive circumstances marked by threat and shrinking political opportunities. I show how differences in temporal frameworks eroded the basis on which activists usually coordinated their next steps, leading to an unresolvable temporal mismatch in their anticipated scenarios, and therefore, in action.

Below, I first introduce my terminology. In the next two empirical sections, I present my analysis of activists' dystopian future imaginary, followed by the temporal dimensions of the different scenarios anticipated by assembly organizers. I conclude by offering the term 'politics of anticipation' which encapsulates the two-pronged argument of this paper.

Dimensions of future projections, the imaginary, and anticipation

Studies of movement coalitions and partnerships identify external conditions (Meyer & Corrigall-Brown, 2005), social ties (Corrigall-Brown & Meyer, 2010), identity and ideology (Bandy & Smith, 2005; Lichterman, 1995), and leadership (Mizrahi & Rosenthal, 2001) as factors contributing to the formation and sustenance of collaborations across movement organizations. Understudied, the disintegration of coalitions is explained by the same factors. Typical of social movement research, this literature focuses predominantly on activism under stable periods in liberal democracies. In the case at hand, not

only were the identitarian, ideological, and organizational bases of coordination (Van Dyke & McCammon, 2010) met, but the least-common-denominator goals, incentives to get involved, and mass mobilization needed for collaboration within an authoritarian context (Clarke, 2011) were also present. Instead, the data point to the explicitly temporal aspects of organizing during transitory times as an underlying cause of the disintegration of this assembly. Although we see references to temporality throughout the social movements literature, it runs in the background of these theories (Gillan & Edwards, 2020) rather than being the object of study or an explanation in itself. Major models of social movement analysis, such as the political process model (McAdam, 1982), protest cycles (Tarrow, 1989), and repertoires of contention (Tilly, 1977) limit their treatment of temporality to long-, medium-, and short-term processes and their effects (McAdam & Sewell, 2001). However, in recent years, there has been an increasing interest in the insights of the sociology of time (Abbott, 2001; Adam, 1998; Zerubavel, 1985), and in temporal approaches to the study of contentious politics (e.g., Della Porta, 2016; Edwards et al., 2020; Lazar, 2014). This article contributes to this emerging body of literature, building on recent conceptual resources such as Mische's (2001, 2009) work on future projections.

Mische offers the concept of the 'project,' or 'projectivity,' to emphasize the 'open-ended horizon of possibility, culturally structured through existing narratives yet still implying orientation, mission, even vocation, in a self-conscious engagement of a changeable future' (Mische, 2001, p. 139). Indeed, activists are agents who are actively and purposefully involved in the making of the future. Mische adds, 'the process of project-formation also entails the capacity to interpret and coordinate one's actions in accordance with the motives and projects of other actors' (Mische, 2001, p. 139). It is the interplay of future projections, or the imaginative engagement with the future, and the coordination between different actors on which I aim to elaborate. I find the different dimensions of future projections that Mische (2009, pp. 609–701) has identified useful when dealing with the more intricate properties of imagination. For example, actors engage in long-, medium-, and short-term imaginaries ('reach'). Imaginaries involve different levels of detail ('clarity'), different ranges of possible scenarios ('breadth'), and varying degrees of considerations about relationships with and between other actors ('sociality'); the future can be seen as fixed or dependent ('contingency'), contracting or expanding ('expandability'), moving towards or away from us ('volition'). I will propose two additional dimensions of projectivity (pace and sequence), and will be using this language to analyze how, during a time of rapid transformations induced by regime change, variation along these dimensions affects the way activists make sense of the situation and make decisions on which to act.

I use the language of imagination because it denotes a) the construction of a mental image of a society that is not (yet) in existence and b) the construction of a relationship with others, whether individuals or institutions, whom one does not know and who may or may not exist in the present. This usage is in line with Benedict Anderson's 'imagined communities' where the members of a political community 'will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson, 2006, p. 18). Closely related, I follow Charles Taylor's relational understanding of 'social imaginary' which refers to 'the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on

between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations' (Taylor, 2004, p. 23). I will use 'the imaginary' when I describe the overall image activists conjured up when talking about the socio-political regime of the future.

While 'the imaginary' captures the *image* of the future, I use the word 'anticipation' as the *act* of expecting and predicting, where actors orient themselves to relatively more minute happenings that they anticipate to occur as an attempt at preparedness. Anticipation will be more prominent when I analyze the competing scenarios that activists put forward. But first, I turn to the activists' shared imaginary in the next section.

The future: a dystopian imaginary

Here, I describe what the future socio-political regime looked like for the assembly around the time of the referendum, the bases of this imaginary in the recent past and the present, and the temporal workings of activists' lived experiences within a volatile political context that incentivized coordinated action despite dystopian possibilities.

I will start with an excerpt from my field notes, written during one of the assembly's last meetings, that depicts how the present informed the activists' imaginary. I will return to the same meeting in more detail in the next section.

We are in a political party's office on the third floor of an apartment building. This week, we are presenting our proposals to overcome the impasse we have reached on the question of whether or not to start campaigning for the next elections that might or might not happen.

During the third presentation, we hear a helicopter hovering very close to the building. Motorcycle noises follow. There are the flashing blue lights of the police on the windows. For some seconds, the presentation goes on, but no one is listening. Those who sit by the windows lean in to see what is going on. I listen, almost wait, for the quick and aggressive steps of the police climbing up the stairs of the building. The person sitting next to me, who is a member of the party whose office we are in, turns off their phone. And at last, someone voices what we are all thinking: 'is the party being raided?'

After the danger has passed, we talk about how bizarre it would be to get arrested there, because only a few people who are at the meeting are actually members of the party. One of them, a party member, says 'fascism does not discriminate,' as if to prove a point they had made earlier in their presentation, that we need to stand together. (Fieldnotes, January 2018)

Our worry that what we were hearing could be a police raid was not without foundation. Raiding of activists' homes, party headquarters, and public meetings was commonplace around the time of the referendum in 2017. Our instant assumption of being raided, and the way we nonchalantly talked about getting arrested point to the everyday expressions of the repressive regime.

Widespread repression engendered anxiety and an urge to act, the need 'to do *something*.' Experiencing in the present how they imagined the future to be, activists were driven to devise ways to alter the awaited course of events. Their experience of the present was, as the excerpt above demonstrates, marked by threat. The source of the threat was the establishment of a new political order in which civil liberties, political freedoms, and

rights would be eliminated, making opposition activists much more vulnerable with regards to the state. The future held a dreaded, instead of a desired, political order. Dystopia was the driver of action.

The dystopian imaginary does not exclude the possibility of change or exit. In fact, dystopia, like utopia, is about the present. As Ruth Levitas (2013) reminds us, 'dystopia portrays the darkness of the lived moment, the difficulty of finding a way out of a totalizing system. It is not necessarily anti-utopian: anti-utopianism actively opposes the imagination and pursuit of alternatives' (p. 110). I use dystopia as 'a route into the debates of our time' (Sargisson, 2007, p. 32), not to conjure up a helpless and hopeless state of passive waiting.

The central theme of the excerpt in the opening of the section, that 'fascism does not discriminate,' appears in the form of a warning for what is to come. It speaks to the shape of the future that is anticipated by the activists, calling attention to the totalizing effect of a regime that will be unsparing in its repression. The presidential system that was the subject of the 2017 referendum was interpreted by some as 'the last nail in the coffin' (Göktaş, 2016). Throughout my fieldwork I heard people say, 'we might not be able to do this meeting here in 2 weeks/2 months/6 months,' suggesting the type of policing that activists anticipated, extrapolating from their experiences in the present. Once, when an assembly participant used the word 'authoritarianism' to describe the future, another activist remarked, 'what authoritarianism? Are we in the EU?,' assigning the word an uptown meaning, a word for privileged people. It implied that what we will have is not authoritarianism but something far worse; 'they'll cut our asses off' was a repeated phrase.

This dystopian imaginary was grounded in recent memory. The Turkish state, dominated by the AKP government, had shown the terror it was capable of inflicting. During Gezi, the then-prime-minister Erdoğan had declared that he was 'barely holding the 50% (his voters) in their homes,' a threat that meant he had full power over what his support base did. Between the two general elections in 2015, which were four months apart, the war on Kurdish people recommenced, cities were reduced to ruins, hundreds of people were killed and hundreds more were displaced in the process (Diyarbakır Bar Association (Diyarbakır Barosu), 2015; HDP, 2016a, b). During these four months, 33 young leftists died in a bombing in Suruç, a border town close to Kobanê, and 103 died in the bombing in the capital Ankara. In early 2016, bombs went off in Sultanahmet and Taksim districts of Istanbul. The political opposition held the government responsible for neglect, if not for direct involvement. During the military coup attempt, Erdoğan called his supporters to take to the streets to confront the military, which resulted in a death toll of 250.

These militaristic techniques were coupled with the criminalization of opposition and purges based on political or religious affiliation. More than 100,000 public sector workers were purged (Turkey Purge, n.d); tens of thousands were arrested and imprisoned, most of them members of parliament from the Peoples' Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP), including its co-leaders (Human Rights Watch, 2017); elected mayors were removed from office; hundreds of media outlets and tens of publishing houses were closed down, hundreds of journalists were jailed (Amnesty International, 2017); and Academics for Peace were purged and indicted with aiding terrorist organizations (Human Rights Foundation of Turkey, 2020).

Therefore, the dystopian imaginary was rooted in the present and the recent past. In the field, I usually heard about the future as an if-then clause: ‘a fascistic regime awaits us *if* we don’t do something.’ Both the first and second parts of this formulation changed according to the speaker’s naming of the problem and the solution they offered. Regardless, the first part described the dystopia, and the second the action to take to reverse the process leading up to the dystopia.

The if-then formulation hints at two distinct but concurrent ways of experiencing temporality. The first is the urgency to act, coupled with the sense that there is no time. The fascist regime of the future is imminent and all-encompassing. The threat is structural and political; it is also personal and physical. ‘We have no time; we are dying!’ exclaimed one of the activists at an assembly meeting, a couple of weeks after the referendum. They meant this literally, referring to the massacres of the last couple of years, where hundreds died in bombings, among them their friends and comrades. This activist wanted to build an alliance between movements, now. Some thought it was impossible. Others said it was not the right time. But for some, ‘the right time’ was a luxury they did not have, there was simply no time.

To have no time means, in practice, that we experience time as accelerated. Too many events happen in a short period, making last week’s news old news, allocating them to the sphere of the past. As events explode and then lose their importance as ‘event,’ activists adjust their understandings, actions, and position. Adjustment means choosing from a range of possibilities. Activists need to make sense of the situation, compare possibilities, discuss their meanings, weigh pros and cons, rearrange their goals, review their principles, agree, disagree, negotiate, reorient their positions, think about their audience, core values, and so on. This process itself is not new or extraordinary. What is extraordinary is the frequency with which it is renewed and repeated under conditions of political uncertainty and looming dystopia. The most trivial of decisions become political quarrels, every single event is viewed as a critical opportunity that should be acted on; if not, we may never have the chance again. However, the dystopian imaginary does not preclude possibilities. On the contrary, at these moments of reorientation, there are too many possibilities. And this brings us to the second way in which temporality is experienced.

Inundation with critical political decisions to make every other day leads to the suspension of time, opening space for possibilities by slowing down our perception of temporality. Imagine a last-minute attempt at a goal that will determine the winner in a football match. The participants of the moment fall silent and hold their breath, going through a range of emotions and considering a variety of possible scenarios. In that moment of uncertainty and anticipation, we experience time in abeyance. Something similar happened in my field site. When ‘disaster’ was around the corner, every move became critical and politically charged; there was insufficient time, and simultaneously, things slowed down, exposing us to a plethora of possibilities to choose from quickly and efficiently, all the while the dystopia of a repressive state loomed closer and larger.

Competing scenarios: anticipation and dimensions of future projections

Participants of the assembly shared the dystopian view of the future, especially after the referendum was lost. This shared vision was one that involved more repression, greater risk of arrests and imprisonment, less participation, and fewer avenues of struggle.

Everyone agreed that the overall political situation was getting worse, that the future looked dystopian if it was not reversed, but not everyone agreed on what to expect, or when. The discretionary nature of the regime ensured that people stayed in the dark about the political calendar, disrupting the rhythm of politics itself, resulting in politics at all levels, but particularly at the level of the grassroots, turning into a matter of guesswork. In the absence of a structural opportunity in the near future, the available possible trajectories were multiple and highly dependent on the differing dimensions of future projections. Therefore, activists were faced with the problem of coordinating their anticipated scenarios, or ‘coordinating futures’ (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013, p. 909). Below, I show how disruption in the ordinary calendar of politics and the ensuing guesswork brought into light the differences in future projections in the form of scenarios about the near future, leading to the disintegration of the local assembly.

In the field, there were several explanations for the disintegration of the assembly. Most centered around waning participation by unaffiliated members combined with political organizations’ insistence on their own agenda. When I asked M., a core organizer who left the assembly in the summer of 2017, why they left, their reply was characteristic of the most common reasons participants gave for the disintegration:

After the referendum, a lot of people left the assembly. We were left alone with political organizations. I was never allergic to political organizations, really, but their dynamics are so different. This is how: You are an organization; you have an agenda you have set for yourself. Even if you say you don’t, you do. The independents [unaffiliated participants] were the people who diluted the assembly. They were the ones who made it ‘softer,’ who made our language more understandable for the person on the street. Political organizations do not work this way. [...] The referendum was over, and until May, June [2017] the independents were still with us. We held a big meeting to discuss what to do next, our roadmap. 100-odd people attended. We spoke, discussed, took notes. Summer arrived. These people are from [a middle-class neighborhood]; they marched off to their summer houses. Or they just quit. [...] When we were left with organizations the situation got harsher. *Because each organization had a different idea for after the referendum.* We started talking about our roadmap, about what to do, and we entered into a process where we could not make decisions. We talked and talked. We held big meetings, made big decisions, but did not stick to them.

M. explains the fraying of the assembly by referring to the contrast in the operational logics of political organizations (political parties or organizations formally registered as associations that are explicitly political in their activities) and informal grassroots organizations/groups (assemblies). The unaffiliated members (unaffiliated with a party or organization) function as the buffer zone between organizations that push for their own agenda, or as people who ensure a balance in the group’s choices and actions. When they withdrew from the assembly, organizations commenced to fight over the trajectory of the assembly, and the remaining unaffiliated members like M. felt powerless against the organized rhetoric of organizations who outnumbered them. This could be read as the very local manifestation of a protest cycle (Tarrow, 1993) with a peak in mobilization during the referendum campaign now experiencing a decline in participation; or a classic case of movement co-optation by institutional actors (Piven & Cloward, 1977).

When I arrived in Istanbul in December 2017, I was aware of the process of decline. This is why, when I attended the weekly coordination meeting of the assembly, I was surprised by the relatively large number of participants (there were about 30 people at the meeting, which was not that different from the campaign period), and especially by the

number of new faces around the table. The smaller neighborhood assemblies had been inactive for some time, which I expected in a period of demobilization, but that the coordination group still met regularly with thirty participants, old and new, was a pleasant surprise. The discussion at that meeting revolved around the ‘roadmap.’ It was a heated debate, verging on a fight from time to time. Lively discussions were characteristic of the assemblies, and fights were rare but not unheard of. It did not seem to me like this was an unsurmountable problem. I started questioning the declining participation and co-optation explanations.

A closer reading of the quotation from M. gave me a lead as to what could be happening. ‘Each organization had a different idea for after the referendum.’ What were these ideas and what were they based on? What were the differences, and did each organization have a different plan or different interests?

K., an unaffiliated assembly participant with a background in socialist politics, reflected on the decline of the assembly:

It was because of the *dissimilar future imaginations* [*benzeşmeyen gelecek tahayyülleri*] of the organizations, groups, and individuals that were involved. [...] I can’t say how each differed on behalf of them, but each had a different reading of politics in Turkey, according to which they positioned themselves. [...] Organizations that did not insist on the assemblies as a tool for the struggle were on the lookout for what the other two actors [opposition parties] were doing to determine their own *future projections* [*gelecek projeksiyonları*].

K.’s observations do not contradict the previous explanations but specify how they work. Their focus is on the future and how not only organizations, but also individuals were trying to position themselves according to other powerful political actors. My analysis is in line with K.’s interpretation, who even uses ‘future imaginations’ and ‘future projections’ as I use them.

By late December 2017, the assembly was at a crossroads: Months of discussions about how to move forward had reached a deadlock. The issue was whether to continue by working towards the coming elections originally scheduled to take place in 2019, or to campaign against the state of emergency and the laws by decree. Those who advocated for the elections argued that there could be snap elections anytime, pointing out the discretionary nature of AKP’s rule and the uncertainty of the near future. In other words, the problem was organizing for an anticipated, but not yet officially scheduled, political event that would be on the public agenda once it was scheduled; but was not yet. For those who opposed the former view, campaigning for the election would present a contradiction between their past and future actions: Campaigning for an election during the state of emergency would legitimize the elections imposed by a regime which the assembly had declared illegitimate after the rigged referendum. They also claimed that elections were not on people’s agenda.

The deadlock led to a splinter meeting at the end of December to organize a campaign for the expected elections, where only those who approached favorably to campaigning were invited. This meeting was met with confusion and disapproval by those from outside, as this assembly had been a model for all the others and had proved one of the most successful during the campaign. Predictably, it instigated conflict within the assembly. A long and confrontational full meeting followed where the splinter group were accused of trampling the principles of the assembly and the splinter group accused

a political organization of causing an impasse. In the end, the need for cooperation and coordination of action was reiterated and the problem was diagnosed by the assembly as one of communication: People did not listen to *understand* but to *object* to others' ideas. The decision was to hold another meeting next week, with anyone who had formulated a way to go forward to make a 30-minute presentation of what they thought was the problem, their demands, and suggestions. Presentations were a last resort to fix the communication problem. By compartmentalizing each speaker via the 'no interruptions' rule and strictly structuring the presentations (ordered: problem, demands, suggestions), the assembly hoped to sidestep the conversational complications that arose from interlacing and competing stories about the future. This method, as we shall see, did not work because the problem was much less negotiable than activists thought; the difficulty, I argue, lay in the variations among future projections. I concentrate on two presenters that crystallized the core points of the two sides of the conflict. These presenters were then involved in two different campaigns, in the way each saw fit, for the early elections of 2018.

The first presenter, S., was from the organization that had been accused by the splinter group of hindering the decision-making process, that advocated for a campaign to end emergency rule. S. started with an assessment, and I paraphrase, leaving their own words in quotation marks:

Democracy has been stolen from us via the shady referendum, and now we are going through a process of a transition to 'open fascism.' We are dealing with a 'stolen government,' a 'stolen referendum,' and 'stolen rights.' 'We have an uncertain, colorless, grey process ahead of us.' In a situation like this, our most important demand is democracy.

Everyone agreed. Even their use of the term 'open fascism,' while not everyone agreed with it, did not elicit a visible reaction. S. continued: 'There can be no election without democracy.' At this point, people started to get fidgety in their seats, checking their phones, taking notes, whispering to the person next to them. But no one interrupted.

The referendum was held during the state of emergency and we lost. Then, we declared the results illegitimate. We were unsuccessful at the referendum because it took place under undemocratic conditions. What we should do now is to ensure that the coming elections, 'if we have elections at all,' take place under democratic circumstances. We should mold the path to the elections so that if we have elections, they will be carried out in a democracy.

S. ended by offering three suggestions for campaigns: 'The state of emergency should be lifted; laws by decree should be nullified; and we should pay more attention to local problems to appeal to more participants and help fight the everyday fascist discourse of the regime.'

In this presentation, there are three main points to highlight: The first is that the future is dark and uncertain. We observe the uncertainty in the passing remark, 'if we have elections at all.' The scheduled political calendar shows November 2019, but S. considers the possibility of the elections being called off. Secondly, 'there can be no election without democracy.' Here, the assumption is that elections will either be cancelled or (less likely) boycotted. Lastly, S. concentrates on the process leading to the elections in 2019, putting democratization chronologically first, and the

elections second. When asked to clarify what they would do in case of an early election, S. replied point-blank, 'the election is not of any interest to me today, we have a year and a half to go. If we can shape the conditions that lead to the elections, we won't need to do much afterwards.'

The second group, who were at the splinter meeting and advocated for an election campaign, felt otherwise. Their spokesperson B. started with two interrelated questions: 'How do we stop fascism from being institutionalized?' and 'over which common denominator can we build a united front for the struggle against fascism?' B. then expanded S.'s formulation: 'Demanding democracy against the one-man regime, we must unify the democratic forces.' The issue went beyond the elections:

Dictatorship and civil war await us either way. To prepare for the new order, we should have a united front. The two opposition parties in the parliament, CHP and HDP, should cooperate for such a front, but they won't unless their constituencies put pressure on them from below. This coming together from the bottom up can only be accomplished through the assemblies, since they are not associated with any political party. Being prepared for what is to come can only be possible if we can implement a democratic culture in these spaces.

B. ended by commenting on the use of the elections:

There might be snap elections, so we should be ready for it. But more importantly, we must use the elections to mobilize and organize people into local assemblies so that we can become political actors and have an effect on the CHP and the HDP.

The room was in agreement throughout this presentation, nodding, and occasionally expressing verbal approval.

Comparing the two, both presentations are similar in their views about the future: The situation is getting worse; all options look bad. They also agree on uncertainty: B. (the pro-campaign group) does not know if and when we should expect elections. However, we get the sense that B. expects a snap election, first because they suggested using it for larger political goals, but also because they participated in the splinter meeting. Both view democratization as the ultimate goal, but B., considering the elections as a tool, places the elections chronologically *before* the attainment of democracy.

To analyze activists' dystopian imaginary in Mische's (2009) terms: It had a long-term reach in that it covered an extensive future, even though *when* that future would begin was unclear. It was a near-future that extended into the horizon and defined the whole, ranging from individual biographies and everyday experiences to possibilities of collective action to the shaping of political history. The dystopian future was rushing towards us, but its realization was contingent on our ability or inability to make use of political opportunities, at a time when they were perceived to be contracting. In terms of breadth, actors imagined the future to be heading in a dystopian direction, but there were multiple possibilities for action in the short and medium term.

Yet, a shared dystopian imaginary was not enough to unite activists under a common agenda. Although the struggle was framed as a struggle for democracy against fascism, the disruption of the political calendar meant that different persons and groups anticipated disparate opportunities for action. Although the disparity in scenarios was not necessarily conflicting, they were competing interpretations that led to the dissolution, or transformation, of the assembly.

The competing scenarios were multi-layered, and it was in these layers that lay the source of divergence. The first group, which objected to campaigning for the elections at the time, saw the elections as fixed in 2019. The second, pro-campaign group accounted for a wider range of scenarios, not only about the date of the elections, but also about how different political actors might act. In this sense, the second project was both wider in breadth (range of scenarios) and higher in its degree of sociality (relationships between different actors' actions). In terms of volition, while the first group perceived the next elections as something that might not happen at all, the second group understood it as something that could happen any time. Accordingly, the reach of each scenario differed. Whereas the first group focused more on what to do until the elections, the second, pro-campaign group suggested a project with a longer-term reach: Elections would be used as a political tool for the development of the local assemblies, which would be the basis of organizing and mobilizing people against the repressive regime of the future.

I build on and extend Mische's (2009) catalogue of different dimensions of projectivity with two additions that were prominent in the discussions: Pace and sequence. Pace refers to the tempo or rhythm at which future occurrences are imagined to happen. Sequencing refers to the chronological order of the anticipated events. The two groups diverged regarding these dimensions. The first expected a slower pace, and a chronological order where the elections came last after a sustained period of campaigning. The second anticipated a continuation of the fast pace of events in politics and so put the possibility of a snap election early in their imagined chronology. These differences produced different orientations: A proposal for shaping the political process culminating in 2019, versus an agenda of being prepared for and organizing around potential snap elections and beyond, respectively.

The meeting ended on a friendly note, but the assembly eventually disintegrated. With the announcement of a snap election in June 2018, the splinter group grew into an elections-oriented assembly and attracted more people. This new assembly, however, focused solely on ballot safety, remaining much more limited than what B. had outlined in their presentation. One of their main organizers was imprisoned immediately after the assembly was established, and a small group splintered off from this assembly as well. The head of the organization whose members fiercely objected to campaigning for the elections was elected as an HDP MP in the snap elections.

Politics of anticipation

I analyzed the disintegration of a grassroots organization at a time when political volatility and the threat of repression shaped various dimensions of projectivity that underpinned coordinated action. I showed how, in politically volatile times, coordinating action became a matter of guessing the political calendar, and of orienting each other towards anticipated futures. I call the two-pronged work of temporal coordination 'politics of anticipation': The term encapsulates the specifically contingent, future-oriented elements inherent to politics that are amplified under authoritarian or transitory regimes on the one hand, and emphasizes temporality and the future themselves as sites of political contention on the other. It thus points to both external conditions and internal movement dynamics, as well as their interactions. Here, I used some tools to examine the politics of anticipation: the political calendar as a typical temporal

arrangement of macro-political events, the imaginary as making up the future-oriented intellectual work of political actors, projections as culturally and historically structured but open-ended horizons of possibility, and scenarios as the narrative act through which futures are contested and coordinated.

I focused on a series of meetings where activists tried aligning their future projections. This process is different from, but related to, frame alignment (Snow & Benford, 1992) and strategy. Temporality underlies both framing and strategizing processes, and an agreement over what the future looks like is needed prior to any strategy. I identified two groups in the assembly with contrasting proposals for how to organize activity after the referendum. Both of these groups framed their struggle as organizing grassroots democracy against authoritarianism through the organizational form of the assemblies, and both agreed on the strategy of coordinated action among all democratic forces in society. In the conflict presented in the paper, however, questions over strategy, which presume a pre-set goal and pathway (Ganz, 2009, p. 9), were overridden by the temporal disruption in the rhythm of politics and by the challenges of coordinating different anticipated scenarios about political opportunities. Therefore, while acknowledging that temporality and futurity are inherent in framing and strategy, I argue for adding anticipation and future projections as a factor alongside political opportunities, resources, identity, interests, and others that affect the emergence, sustenance, and decline of movements.

What activists endeavored to develop was a way to predict the electoral schedule in a disrupted political calendar and to act accordingly. In other words, the contestation was not immediately and directly over framing or strategy, but over the sequence, pace, reach, breadth, clarity, volition, and sociality of their future projections. When participants' projections did not match, they followed distinct trajectories. This temporal mismatch was much like Wagner-Pacifici and Ruggero's 'temporal blindspots' as 'coordinative disjunctures' (Wagner-Pacifici & Ruggero, 2020, p. 676), although I concentrated here on the processes by which those blindspots were brought into view and contested by activists. I explained the temporal mismatch and ensuing disintegration by:

- (1) A changing future: Regime change led to the disruption of the rhythm and the regular calendar of politics, prompting uncertainty, anxiety, and an urge to reverse the awaited course of events.
- (2) A shared dystopian imaginary concerning the extended future: The transition to authoritarianism and the disruption of the political schedule brought about a dystopian imaginary. However, this common vision was insufficient for coordination. Actors had to reorient themselves with regards to the intricate temporal details of this vision.
- (3) Scenarios about what would happen next that differed in their dimensions of future projections: Activists attempted to 'coordinate futures' by talking about the scenarios they anticipated to happen. Events held historical, political, and personal stakes. In this context, the assembly was unable to agree on one of the competing scenarios.

Systematic analyses of the temporal dynamics of political struggles are not only important to expand our knowledge of social movements, but also to understand authoritarian transitions and the challenges faced by struggles for democracy and justice today. Different political systems operate with different temporal logics. The political uses of

schedules and calendars, disruptions in everyday rhythms of politics, the limits on future projections, short- and long-term predictions, imaginaries, and anticipation all have serious consequences for contentious politics.

Note

1. This study was approved by the ethics review process at LSE's sociology department. I obtained verbal informed consent from all research participants. Names of neighborhoods, persons, and political organizations other than parties have been anonymized throughout this article.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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