



SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Bureaucracies under authoritarian pressure: legal destabilisation, politicisation and bureaucratic subjectivities in contemporary Turkey

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Abstract

Drawing on ethnographic research across two street-level bureaucratic institutions in Istanbul, Turkey in the late 2010s, this paper traces the causes and implications of the politicisation of bureaucrats in the context of authoritarianisation. It argues that politicisation of bureaucrats cannot solely be taken as a reflection of the erosion of bureaucratic autonomy and capacity but must be explored further to reveal how bureaucrats cope with authoritarian pressure as well socio-legal destabilisations to preserve their institutional ethos. To this aim, I demonstrate how bureaucrats get politicised in response to authoritarian policies and, in turn, labour to uphold the rule of law despite politico-legal risks. The paper particularly focuses on how bureaucrats weave political solidarity and circulate anti-government discourses and how they use their knowledge of the legal-regulatory repertoire and archives to deter and ‘correct’ unlawful practices through their everyday work. The paper generates insights into the fashionings of political subjectivities and agency by bureaucrats through their labouring in the face of authoritarian interventions, legal disruptions and the increasing interactions with the citizenry. In doing this, my objective is to shed light on the everyday workings of authoritarian state and to get a better picture of the way the law is ‘made real’ (Latour, 2002) across mundane encounters between bureaucrats and the citizenry.

Keywords: bureaucracy; state; subjectivity; politicisation; Turkey

1 Introduction

As I struggled to cope with ‘paperwork’, composed of both hardcopies and electronic ones, for the upcoming election, a colleague of mine approached my desk at the ministerial office¹ in a central, upper middle-class district of Istanbul where we both worked. A self-professed secularist-modernist who have been working in civil service for the last two decades, Sanem² had come to ensure that her details were correctly added to the roll of bureaucrats to oversee polling stations. She suspected the government of planning to meddle with the process, I was told. As the number of the civil servants

¹As many other scholars underlined, ‘Turkey has had a strong state tradition and centralized administrative system with a system of tutelage by the national government over local governments since the Ottoman times’ (Gul and Tasdan, 2013, p. 521). Within this politico-historical background, the Turkish bureaucratic landscape today consists of hierarchical ministerial organisations with a central organisation (*Bakanlık* (ministry) and *genel müdürlük* (general directorate)) in Ankara and subordinate offices (*il müdürlükleri*) in every city, where they oversee the work of district offices (*ilçe müdürlükleri*). The office I worked at alongside my interlocutors was the Ministry of Education, which not only supervised schools but also oversaw electoral processes.

²In order to ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were used throughout the text. Given the sensitive nature of the data, I took the liberty of further complicating the depictions and randomly used gender and age swapping to avoid any sort of hints that may be used to identify my interlocutors.

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barely matched the officially mandated posts, I assured her that it was impossible to leave her name out of the list. She trusted our friendship and my political convictions but still stayed on to talk about the ongoing political contestations – all despite the fact that any expression of political views by civil servants within the confines of the public office was expressly forbidden by the law (Law No. 657 §2, Art. 7).

Although she had also acted as a polling station chief in the preceding elections, Sanem used to see such electoral duties as dull chores – an obligation that she was forced to perform as a civil servant – and had used our friendship, albeit unsuccessfully, to dodge the assignment back in the preceding electoral cycle. That time, however, she was adamant to take up her post since, in her own words, the ‘very prospect of the democratic life was at stake’. Not only, she thought, was the government trying to put ‘their men’ into key posts to rig the electoral process, she whispered, but the director and a number of his deputies we worked under were also conspiring to prevent people like her, whose opposition to the government was felt but never transpired in words, from taking part in the process.

A couple of days later, another colleague, Kaan, an educated man around my age hailing from the rural heartland of Turkey and regularly performing daily prayers, stopped by my desk to have a quick chat. Similar to Sanem’s case, Kaan had also done his best to avoid such tasks in the previous electoral cycle but was rather eager that time. Perceiving the upcoming election as a test for the country’s democracy, Kaan saw it as his civic duty to ensure that the elections were conducted fairly and the government candidate was not favoured. How was I to understand the growing eagerness of Sanem and Kaan to use their position to resist what they perceived to be an authoritarian dismantling of democratic norms and institutions? Did their ideological orientation supersede their bureaucratic impartiality? Even though politicisation of bureaucrats has widely been associated with nepotistic erosion of institutional autonomy, capacity and meritocratic procession – hence the legal prohibition/regulations around the (public) involvement of civil servants in wider political contestations (see Ferguson, 1994; Weber, 1978) – how are we to understand the sociopolitical engagements through which civil servants breach the established conventions to counter governance and to uphold the organisational capacities of the institutions they work at? What were the parameters of politicisation within the confines of bureaucracy as ‘an institution delivering public goods and services’ (Olivier de Sardan, 2013, p. 46)?³

Reflecting on these questions, this paper draws on an ethnographic research across two bureaucratic organisations⁴ in the second half of the 2010s in Istanbul, Turkey and explores how contemporary reconfigurations of politico-legal field in Turkey reverberate everyday across everyday dealings, negotiations and contestations of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980). I trace the ways in which bureaucrats engage with ongoing political contestations despite considerable professional-legal risks to argue that such ‘politicisation’ – a term I explain further below – cannot be reduced to the erosion of bureaucratic autonomy and capacity in favour of the party in power but underpins how street-level bureaucrats deploy their professional expertise to preserve their institutional autonomy and (what they perceived to be) democracy. The data I present here particularly reflect how bureaucrats use their know-how to deter (what they deem to be) ‘illegitimate’ demands and policies of their ‘politically connected’ superiors and to ‘maintain’ the rule of law through their everyday work.

This exploration of bureaucracies in contemporary Turkey is important for a number of reasons. First, the paper moves away from conventional analyses of bureaucracy, which have long focused on their institutional-regulatory framework, and rather presents a ‘fieldwork-based information on the workings of actual bureaucracies’ (Heyman, 2012, p. 1269) that are animated through everyday struggles, negotiations and manoeuvres by actual civil servants living under an increasingly unstable politico-legal system. Second, while most analyses on statecraft focus on the margins, this paper

³Bureaucracy is a ‘promiscuous concept’, as Lea (2021) underlines, that both sits at the centre of contemporary theoretical articulations and eludes clear definition. It spans across a rather wide range of social and political domains, describing ‘everything from corrupt officialdom to overwhelming inventory cultures’ (Lea, 2021, p. 42).

⁴Given the politically sensitive nature of the analysis, this ambiguity around these organisations is not unintentional and aims to protect the anonymity and well-being of my interlocutors.

presents a perspective from within and illustrates how statecraft has been transfigured in the 2010s. Third, the exploration reveals how bureaucrats fashion their political subjectivities and cannot be dispensed simply as ‘intermediaries, who negotiate between the state and’ the citizenry (Tarlo, 2001, p. 69), but also as active agents who use their official capacity to forge pathways in line with their political leanings. This attendance to the politicisation of bureaucrats will demonstrate how bureaucracies are actual political sites where bureaucrats weave their ‘official and citizenly commitments’ (du Gay, 2005, p. 10).

2 Politicisation as a term: subservient or resisting agents?

Politicisation as a term is used either (1) to denote the illicit links of bureaucrats to the political organisations for posts and resources; or (2) to underline the growing degrees of active political participation by bureaucrats. Better grasped by the terms cronyism-nepotism, collusion and corruption, the former pinpoints to the bureaucrats’ forgings of illicit connections to political actors/institutions for financial/professional advancements. As the predominant representation across the media, too, ‘politicisation of bureaucracy’, for this very reason, has mostly been traced through the nepotistic promotion/appointments of cronies to top managerial posts across bureaucracy. In the public offices in which I worked, too, the same line of thought prevailed with various civil servants repeatedly pinpointing directors and some deputies, ‘the administration’, as concrete examples of political corruption within their own organisation. It was widely circulated within the office that these men – reflecting the ostentatiously gendered dynamic of the process – had been appointed to their positions solely through ‘phone calls from Ankara’, indicating that their status as managers was achieved not because of their merits but through their connections to the AKP, the party-in-power led by President Erdogan, network.

The second dimension of the term ‘politicisation’ refers to civil servants’ growing interest and participation in ongoing political contestations, hinting that the process is geared towards ideological-political fault lines, rather than aiming promotion. This paper focuses on this aspect of the term and explores civil servants’ political positionings that are antagonistic to hegemonic political actors and could result only in alienation from their superiors. Despite the severity of legal stipulations prohibiting the involvement of the civil servants in politics, for instance, many of my interlocutors disapproved their superiors’ political connections to the AKP and expressed their sympathies for opposition parties and figures. During both local and parliamentary elections in the late 2010s, for instance, many civil servants I worked with took their official duties as occasions to prevent any potential vote-rigging and to ensure a fair electoral process in the face of growing suspicion around government attempts to intervene in voting and vote-counting. Many others were vocal critics of the government policies both within and beyond the office we worked in.

3 Methods and positionality

My access to bureaucratic organisations in Istanbul stemmed from my temporary employment in these two organisations alongside career bureaucrats – ranging from civil servants (*memur*) who directly engage with the citizenry to the district governor (*kaymakam*) – on personnel appointments, management of complaints from the citizenry, audits, electoral preparations and implementation/dissemination of ministerial directives.⁵ The ethnographic study coincided with both the last phases of the tumultuous ‘state of emergency’, imposed right after the coup attempt in July 2016, and the period following the return to the ‘normal’ state of affairs in July 2018. In addition to the ethnographic data I collected throughout this period, I conducted a number of follow-up interviews in 2020.

⁵Normally, bureaucrats are appointed for life through a centrally administered exam and points-based selection process. Apart from provisions for persons with disabilities, the state more or less stopped hiring for ministerial offices. My employment was provisional (until my appointment at the public university) and yet paid. It was possible, paradoxically, by the unprecedented changes to the bureaucratic workings during this very period of state of emergency. My appointment at a local public university could not be processed due to a security vetting procedure (*güvenlik soruşturması*), at which I was informed to have failed eventually.

Even though my position as an academic/researcher was evident, sparing me from the limitations and obligations of other civil servants, I was also given tasks, as in the case of handling electoral preparations, allowing me to directly both observe and experience how paperwork is generated, how hierarchical negotiations are to be conducted and how sensitive/political matters are to be handled.

Given the implications of doing ethnographic research ‘at home’ (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1984; Saglam, 2021a; 2021b; Tsuda, 2015), it is also important to underline that I was already entangled with wider sociopolitical contestations and polarisations. My lifestyle, educational attainments, politico-legal troubles and political orientation have clearly generated a particular position that most civil servants, including the director and his deputies, interpreted as ‘against’ the government. This dynamic, set in motion without necessarily learning about my views *per se*, was at play in a number of encounters where fellow civil servants, even though they did not know me, automatically positioned me in the anti-AKP camp and started talking to me about the destabilising influences of the pro-government forces within the administration. This assigned position, no doubt, thoroughly affected my social relations within the public offices and the way I was approached by civil servants. While most were friendly and open towards me possibly due to their presumed alignments between our sociopolitical orientations, some others – though considerably few in number but nevertheless influential (especially the deputies with connections to the party in power) – were more distant and cautious. Moreover, my researcher status (i.e. not being a career bureaucrat with aspirations to be promoted) created a unique position through which my interlocutors could be more casual and open with me. The arguments raised throughout this paper reflect this interactive dynamic that I could not really control or have prepared for but found myself situated in.

4 Context: neoliberal restructuring, destabilisations and anxiety around impartiality

Three main points must be underlined to reflect on the radical transformation of bureaucracy in the Turkish context, especially since the turn of the twenty-first century.

First, the post-1980 period witnessed the radical restructuring of the bureaucratic organisations, the inertia of which had long been thought to hinder economic development and democratisation. As bureaucratic–military tutelage had thoroughly affected the political field since the foundation of the Republic, discussions both in the 1980s and the early 2000s revolved around how the secularist-nationalist outlook of (senior) bureaucrats effectively blocked the political agenda of (elected) governments (see Heper, 1989). To this end, the AKP governments of the 2000s hastened to appoint new bureaucrats who shared their neoliberal-developmental ethos and could ‘work in harmony’ with the government (Aydın and Demirelli, 2017).

In line with the global shift towards the marketisation of state services since the 1980s (du Gay, 2005; Graeber, 2015) and with ‘calls for increased efficiency driven by quantitative measures’ (Bear and Mathur, 2015, p. 30), a neoliberal ethos has also gradually been established in Turkey to characterise a ‘state in the service of the citizenry’, replacing the state/bureaucracy leading the country in its journey of modernisation (Aydın, 2020; Bayramoğlu, 2005; Ayman Güler, 2005).⁶ The underlying logic behind such initiatives was a commitment to ‘the virtue of free market and open competition’, as Heper (1989, p. 464) writes. To facilitate the establishment of a new logic of governance alongside the global ideals of ‘transparency and accountability’ (see Mathur, 2012), bureaucratic organisations were restructured to provide an efficient and streamlined service for the citizenry with accompanying digitalisation and complaint/feedback mechanisms (e.g. Right to Information Act of 2003 or CIMER (Presidential Communications Centre)) through which citizens could take action on neglect, mistreatment and discrimination by bureaucrats. Working through such civic feedback has long been thought to induce transparency and a new ethos of performance measurement ‘to change a public sector

⁶No doubt, this effort to render bureaucracy as ‘efficient’ can be traced back to the post-1980 period under the leadership of Turgut Özal. Heper argues that ‘for the Motherland Party government the goal of reducing the scope of civil bureaucracy in Turkish politics and coincidentally rendering the bureaucracy efficient and effective gained utmost significance’ (Heper, 1989, p. 463).

culture of “secrecy” into one of “openness” (Bear and Mathur, 2015, p. 29). These structural reconfigurations of bureaucratic ethos and praxis, especially since the 2000s, have been noticeable in Istanbul.

The peak of this transformation of bureaucratic structure, no doubt, came in 2016, when the failed coup attempt was followed by the state of emergency until 2018. The period was remarkable due to the frequency of state-of-emergency decrees (*kanun hükmünde kararname* (KHK), lit. decree with the force of law), which considerably limited the scope of liberties, closed down non-governmental and media organisations, instituted immunity from prosecution for a number of crimes, purged civil servants from the public office and confiscated private property – all in contravention to the fundamental principles of the Constitution, juridical precedents and relevant other legal stipulations (Yılmaz and Turner, 2019).⁷ The overwhelming use of both the state-of-emergency decrees, which strengthened the executive vis-à-vis the legislative and the juridical oversight,⁸ and the omnibus laws (*torba yasa*), which created multiple legal changes at once, by the government have radically altered the political and juridical system (Erem, 2017; Haspolat Yıldırım, 2016; Sav, 2014).

In the 2010s, elections in Turkey unprecedentedly generated a debate around the possibility of electoral fraud and rigging through an authoritarian hijacking of state institutions.⁹ Turkey was no stranger to the political polarisation, but elections had been relatively safe and fair since the transition to the multiparty politics in 1950 (Kalaycıoğlu, 2002) – if one is to oversee the legal obstructions around the very entry of Kurdish actors into the political field.¹⁰ Bureaucratic organisations, until then, had been conceived to be ‘apolitical’ administrators of such sociopolitical debates and to be autonomous enough to deflect any meddling that could undermine the public trust in the management of such vital political processes (Babül, 2017). This claim to be ‘apolitical’, however, may be contested since, as Heper (1989, p. 462) argues, most bureaucrats have been historically sympathetic to the secular-modernist project (Babül, 2017; Heper, 1989) and engaged in ‘negative politics’ – that is, they treated the elected government officials, whom they viewed as regressive, in a hostile manner and tried to block/hinder their policy formulations. And yet, Turkish bureaucracy, in Prussian tradition, overall considered itself, as Heper (1985, p. 92) underlines, ‘above the competing particular interests of party and class, embodying the universal interests of society as a whole, and endowed with a special political wisdom’.¹¹

As a result of the radical overhaul of the sociopolitical topography since the 2010s, the Turkish public seemed to have developed considerable doubts about the penetration of bureaucratic echelons with politically involved actors, who could use their offices to subvert the process in favour of the party in power. Reflecting the wider discussions around the ‘capturing’ of the state by the AKP (Somer, 2016), social anxiety around potential governmental meddling in elections has been rather ostensible especially in the electoral cycles of the 2010s, when the country’s descent into authoritarianism has accelerated (Akkoyunlu and Öktem, 2016; Esen and Gümüşçü, 2016; Küçük and Özselçuk, 2019; Öktem and Akkoyunlu, 2016; Somer, 2016; Yabancı, 2019).¹² This anxiety seems to have created both a

⁷For a legal assessment of the problems generated by the frequent uses of state-of-emergency decrees by the government, please see Can and Şimşek Aktaş (2017).

⁸For an assessment of the new presidential power to promulgate decrees and the Constitutional Court’s oversight on the executive in the post-2017 period, please see Can (2020).

⁹The anxieties around the fairness of electoral process may have been affected by the historical experiences in 1912 and 1946, which involved intimidation and violence against opposition. For more information on the electoral structure in Turkey, see Sayari and Esmer (2002).

¹⁰There were and still are numerous legal mechanisms that have kept Kurdish political actors from the political field. In previous decades, disqualification and prosecution/imprisonment have widely been used. In the last few years, similarly, imprisoning multiple Kurdish political figures/parliamentarians and removing elected mayors from office and appointing governors as trustees (*kayyım*) were two of the most widely used tactics by the government.

¹¹This set of ‘universal interests’, no doubt, involved an adherence to Turkish nationalism with a rather blatant exclusion of non-Turkish/Muslim groups, such as Greeks, Armenians and Kurds, despite legal equality. As illustrated by the transformation of Prussian bureaucrats from politically neutral technicians to politically involved actors in postwar Germany (Putnam, 1973), such ideal types of ‘apolitical bureaucracy’ are hard to come by.

¹²While the Turkish political system has always displayed authoritarian-majoritarian characteristics (Bakiner, 2017; Erensi and Alemdaroğlu, 2018), it is still important to delineate the sociopolitical shift that the country experienced in the 2010s as

sense of cynicism permeating conversations and the emergence of citizen-led initiatives to oversee the handling of elections, such as *Oy ve Ötesi* (Vote and Beyond).

5 Everyday service: expertise, (im)partiality and renegotiations¹³

Since the 2000s, the old bureaucratic vanguard had been slowly but steadily replaced by relatively younger cadres of civil servants, reflecting the wider sociocultural transformations of Turkish society (see also Lambert and Kolloch, in this issue). The growing majority of civil servants I worked with in Istanbul were in their thirties and had considerably higher levels of educational attainment in comparison to the predecessors who often were high-school graduates. Despite displaying divergent political orientations, most of the civil servants objected to the political agenda of the government and often circulated their political views among themselves.¹⁴ Drawing on the friendships they forged across the office, they also urged each other to be vigilant against illegitimate conduct of their superiors.

In my first couple of weeks at the office, for instance, I came across Handan, a college-educated and soft-spoken woman in her fifties, on my way out. Tapping on my shoulder gently, she started asking questions about the ongoing political discussions without necessarily making her anti-government thoughts explicit. Handan had met me on my first day in the office and asked a number of questions about my doctoral research. As I listened intently on the staircase of the office, she gently grabbed my arm, came closer and – most likely to prevent anyone from eavesdropping – whispered: ‘I assume we have similar political positions, am I wrong?’ Although Handan’s caution was assuring, I was perplexed by this unexpected encounter on the staircase where someone could still hear us given the risks, including not only hostility from her superiors but also disciplinary investigations, demotion, salary cut and even dismissal. Since 2016, thousands of civil servants had been purged from office without any legal recourse to appeal,¹⁵ reflecting the country’s swift descent to authoritarianism, dismantling of legal protections and the erosion of the rule of law. Handan’s decision to lower her voice to render our conversation discreet (Mahmud, 2014) within the publicness of the office both revealed that she was very well aware of the sociopolitical significance of her words and how she nevertheless desired to labour against the paranoid atomism this authoritarian crackdown (I presumed to have) generated. Handan’s initiative, I have come to realise in the following weeks, was far from unique.

well as the intensification of authoritarianism alongside the ‘consolidation of neoliberalism’ (see Geniş, 2020). Borsuk *et al.* (2021) underline that ‘authoritarian neoliberalism in Turkey has been consolidated during AKP rule via its dominant party position’ (p. 22) and posits neoliberal authoritarianisation in five folds: ‘(1) executive centralization, (2) autocratic legalism, (3) cronyism, (4) violence-fuelled rentier accumulation as well as (5) criminalization and stigmatization’ (p. 19).

¹³Even though there are nominal resemblances between how bureaucrats ‘resist’ their superiors and the ‘resistance’ detailed by James Scott in his seminal book, *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), I underline the analytic divergence between the two cases. First and foremost, unlike the case I describe here, Scott’s whole argument is structured upon a Marxist paradigm within which the central tenet of conflict is economic. No need to say that the bureaucrats I am describing here do not constitute the antagonists of their superiors and the ultimate theme of conflict and negotiation is sociopolitical-ideological. A number of other points may be highlighted to underline why I am actually rather reluctant to use Scott’s arguments: Scott underlines how Malaysian peasants’ everyday resistance was a modality of ‘self-help’ while my interlocutors labour for what they deem to be a ‘common good’ despite immense risks to their personal standing and financial interests. In addition, while Malaysian peasants ‘typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority’, my interlocutors do not shy away from such encounters and sometimes actively seek them. Even though Scott’s work has been rather useful for my scholarly journey and analytics as an anthropologist, due to these reasons, I do not believe in instantiating their negotiations as ‘resistance’, which, I believe, would divert the focus from the forgeries of political-ethical subjectivities in multiple modalities and instances.

¹⁴The scope of this support for the opposition was not limited solely to the CHP (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*), but also extended to others. Although civil servants historically supported the CHP, the party that championed the secularism and Turkish nationalism since the 1920s, it was surprising to see the growing sympathy for the HDP (Peoples’ Democracy Party), a coalition of progressive forces led by the Kurdish political movement and advocating local governance.

¹⁵In 2017, *OHAL İşlemleri İnceleme Komisyonu* (Commission to Examine the Proceedings of the State of Emergency) was formed to handle complaints pertaining to the state-of-emergency decrees. Applications to the commission involved mostly the dismissals via KHKs, against which there was no juridical oversight.

One morning in May, for instance, a number of civil servants had gathered in the room of Sanem and Cengiz, discussing the political situation as well as what is to be done. When I joined them, Kemal, a college graduate in his thirties, was intently listening to others' arguments around the tactics to be employed by the opposition figures. After a while, he turned to me and expressed his surprise with the 'optimism' of the others: 'They are all talking as if the government would not steal the election!' Hearing Kemal's objection, Cem, another colleague who had rather strong political convictions, interrupted him and started a long tirade around why cynicism could not help and if 'we' were to do whatever we could to the best of our ability, it was more than enough to ensure that the government could not steal anything. Others agreed that they should have made sure their families and friends casted their votes and they, as civil servants to administer the election, were to be vigilant in polling stations to prevent any meddling or rigging. Kemal further argued that, even though he always did his part, he did not trust the high-level bureaucrats in Ankara, whom he saw as pawns of the government. Cengiz, a college graduate and one of my closest friends in the office with whom I spent most of my lunch breaks, also agreed with Kemal. Even if 'we' did our best to ensure that the voters are not manipulated and the ballots were fairly counted, how could we be sure that they, meaning the high-level pro-government bureaucrats in Ankara, would not meddle with numbers 'up there'?

The strength of political convictions of civil servants and their eagerness to deliberate on the political strategies amongst themselves were remarkable but it was not the only modality of politicisation. Another colleague, Ceyda, a middle-aged university-graduate colleague whose diligence, dedication and hard work were appreciated by all, was adamant that the legal stipulations prohibiting the expression of political views by civil servants observed within the bounds of the office. As she stopped by my room regularly, I could observe first-hand how she was adamant to simply follow the law and expected all other civil servants to do the same with no exception. Although I personally knew that she and her husband – whom I met few times during our lunch breaks – also criticised the government and voted for opposition parties, Ceyda was convinced that such dialogues did not belong to the public office, especially in the presence of others. In her eyes, civil servants were to be impartial in their dealings – regardless of the political implications of their conduct. When a citizen started talking about the ongoing political debates in an explicitly anti-government manner, for instance, Ceyda was quick to remind her that the office was not the place for such talks (*bunun yeri burası değil*). Her objection, she explicated further afterwards, was not based on the content the pensioner raised – which Ceyda said she agreed with – but the very act of expressing political opinions in the office.

In a similar vein, when Ceyda had been assigned the task at polling stations in the preceding elections, she said, she was too diligent – even for her own standards – to prevent any errors or bias and ensured that none of the political party representatives at the polling station she presided over were able to influence the voting and counting processes in favour of their candidates. She kept to the letter of the electoral regulations – often to the protests of the voters. Thinking that an illiterate grandmother could have been misled by her grandchildren to vote for another party/candidate, Ceyda prevented – in line with the law – young relatives of elderly voters from going into the booth alongside their kin. She diligently explained that voting was an individual civic duty and the votes cast were not manipulated in any way. Her strictly rule-based style and practice, she said, created a sense of fairness and superseded any political party representative's will. She repeated more than once that the role of the civil servants was not to work for their political ideals but to apply the rules uniformly and consistently – regardless of and even despite bureaucrat's own thoughts and feelings. Impartiality of civil service, for Ceyda, was not merely an ideal that one could neglect. She emphasised that it was the only modality of bureaucracy to be practised every day.

Similarly to Ceyda's ethical¹⁶ articulations around the bureaucratic craft, Tansu, a college-educated man in his thirties, refrained from expressing his political opinions in front of many of his colleagues but was not hesitant to express his opposition to the government agenda outside the office. A

¹⁶Ethics, within this framework, does not simply entail a set of abstract ideals independently of praxis but is intricately linked to its application and embodiment. I particularly refer to Saba Mahmood's (2005) exploration of the cultivation of ethical selves through corporeal technologies in an Aristotelean manner.

supporter of secularist modernisation and a witty critique of the government, Tansu was the head of a department (*şef*) and used his extensive knowledge of bureaucratic procedures to often successfully dispel nepotistic attempts by the administration. When the director attempted to reappoint a politically connected teacher as a deputy without the due process, Tansu was quick to remind how the legally allowed number of deputies could have not been breached due to laws and regulations and how, had the director gone ahead with it, such appointments were to be scrapped by the governorate. Already perceiving most of his superiors as professionally inept agents who have risen through ranks thanks to their ties to the AKP, Tansu was specifically infuriated by the ostentatious disregard of legally sanctioned routes to appoint deputies as well as the 'blissful ignorance' (*cahil cesareti*) of the administration to even consider such a move.

In many other encounters, Tansu used his expertise on the legal canon as well as archival regulations to either tone down or foreclose some of the attempts of the administration. His hindrances had been noted by some of the deputies, with whom he sometimes clashed, but his meticulousness in documentation as well as his robust experience in the legal-regulatory framework effectively kept them at a distance. As he painstakingly included the legal references of the administrative practices in the texts he prepared as well as including the involved deputies to sign the document – hence deflecting the legal responsibility from himself to his superiors – Tansu's detailed writing style (see Cody, 2009) as well as his vast knowledge of the legal corpus often clashed with the hasty style of his superiors. Even when he had to concede, Tansu's documentary and archival praxis incessantly reminded his superiors of the proper bureaucratic craft and how even the most minute decisions were to be grounded in the law.

Such interventions through documentary praxis to counter the influence of pro-government actors within bureaucracy could also be observed in the case of three other civil servants, one department head and two deputies. Widely known to rant about the government policies in her room, the department head, Selvin, an educated woman in her late fifties, was adamant in her electoral duties for the aforementioned reasons and meticulously used the regulations and her expertise in her dealings to ensure that none of the deputies can be involved in her department's affairs and meddle with the routine practices. When they attempted to implement policies that she politically disagreed with, she gave long explanations with extensive references to relevant laws and regulations both to 'intimidate' (*gözlerini korkutmak*) the administration about the documentary traces of their potential breaches and to signal that she knew what they had in mind and was on alert.

In a similar vein, the two deputies, Onur and Deniz, a college-educated man in his fifties and a college-educated woman in her sixties, respectively, were adamant in using their positions to actively resist the workings of the directorate when they deemed the practices to be unfair and illegitimate. Both were already targeted more than once by the director and the rest of the deputies ('the administration') but were nevertheless indispensable for the functioning of the administration since they had the most extensive managerial experience and expertise in the legal-regulatory framework. Although alienated from the pro-government administration, both deputies continued to use their position and expertise to create documentary traces of nepotistic-corrupt practices. Deniz, for instance, was adamant to present her objections to the proposed practices of the administration and offered alternative recourses in writing so as to force the administration to pursue these legally sanctioned paths.

In a similar vein, Deniz and Onur also strived to shield their subordinates from the politically motivated or what they deemed to be 'unethical' assaults by pro-government actors. When the administration received a complaint-denunciation from a member of the public accusing one of the schools of tolerating the display of political posters that 'insulted the statesmen and the police', for instance, the principal of the school used the denunciation to target one of his own deputies. When they reviewed the response letter by the principal, however, deputies intervened so as to omit all the explicit references to the assistant principal. This particular intervention, Deniz explained during our conversation over coffee, was both to stop the aforementioned principal from using this newly emerged politico-legal instrument (complaint/feedback lines) to punish others and, maybe more importantly, to foreclose legal destabilisations caused by such denunciations in the post-2016

period, during which such tips were used by the government to purge thousands and intimidate the rest. He immediately quoted the legal foundation of trade union activities within schools and the constitutional guarantees around the freedom of expression to substantiate his position. The official response to the denunciator, hence, reminded him/her of the legal rights of trade union representatives to use boards in teachers' lounges to disseminate their political arguments and mentioned no particular names as a scapegoat.

Clashing with the administration and the deputies more openly, Deniz was also eager to record every bit of improper conduct (*usulünce yapılmayan*) both to accumulate the evidential data for a revanchist future, when the administration would be held accountable to their actions, and, like Selvin and Canan, to signal to the pro-government agents that they did not completely control the institution and 'there were still honorable civil servants in the watching over their actions'.

In all cases, all three used their positions, documentary praxis and legal expertise to challenge the control and intimidation across the bureaucratic spaces as well as to create a documentary trace of what they deemed to be 'illegal' or 'unethical' practices conducted by pro-government bureaucrats.

No doubt, political contestations were not the only motives affecting their decision and positions, but were one of the primary fault lines through which most of the civil servants related to one another within the office – even when they explicitly dissociated themselves from active politics. Through their positions, I observed first-hand, civil servants made sure that their 'politically involved' superiors – here 'politicisation' is used by many to indicate a sense of nepotism-cronyism and corruption – could not completely hollow out the institution they worked in and strived to use their expertise to preserve the organisational capacities until the trend of authoritarianisation could be reversed. Going alongside their everyday cynicism (Navaro-Yashin, 2002; 2007a), civil servants were confident that the Turkish sociopolitical system will outlive the authoritarian onslaught and the destabilisations it brings on. For them, the 'return to' the democratic order with a stable legal order was neither impossible nor distant. Their eagerness to forge horizontal networks with their colleagues and their everyday labouring to uphold the law testify to this weary and yet optimistic hope for change in the near future. Bureaucrats' everyday negotiations and contestations, in this sense, not only strived towards the preservation of the bureaucratic ethos and capacity in the face of authoritarian destabilisations but also laboured to endure, contain and deflect the political influences in the present for a much-desired future of redemption and restitution.

6 Tracing bureaucratic manoeuvres

Departing from the cases I recounted above, I first underline that there seems to be a growing anxiety among the majority of civil servants – apart from those who come to occupy the top ranks through their connections to the party in power – around the erosion of 'democratic' institutions and processes as well as the lawfulness of current practices of governance. Politicisation, here, emerges as a response to this perceived erosion of 'republican ethos' – often conflated with democracy – and its replacement with an authoritarian-nepotistic governance with its ever-deteriorating legal stability. Politicisation, in this sense, does occur in two folds: first as an instantiation of bureaucracy as a politically neutral arbiter that is 'corrupted' by authoritarian-cronyistic interventions of political actors (e.g. political parties or populist politicians) and second as a growing interest in wider political contestations that are perceived to be antagonistic to power. Bureaucrats do not necessarily consider their positioning as 'political' per se and construe it as a neutral position that is necessary, legitimate and lawful for the common good of the whole society – ultimately invoking the conventional articulations of bureaucracy as a technically competent and apolitical actor regulating our lives.

Furthermore, civil servants' anxiety around the erosion of the 'republican/democratic' infrastructure for a nepotistic-authoritarian governance seems to lay the foundations for their fashionings as political-moral subjects. That is, condemning the government policies as corrupt, illegitimate and anti-

democratic becomes a subjectivising¹⁷ and agentivising occasion through which they position themselves as ‘political-moral’ subjects who are resisting, rejecting and hindering – what they perceive to be – an illegitimate and corrupt power. Handan’s comments in the staircase and outside the office, in this sense, both operate as instances through which she forges her political subjectivity (as an ethical bureaucrat labouring for the ‘common good’ in the face of an authoritarian-corrupt power) and predisposes her to act in a particularly politicised manner. Through circulating narratives of ‘meddling with electoral results up there’, civil servants both situate themselves alongside wider sociopolitical debates and fashion themselves as ‘ethical’ agents working for the ‘common good’. This politicisation, in this sense, emerges as the first step of this bureaucratic fashioning of political-moral subjectivities through the incessant deployments of bureaucrats’ professional skills and expertise across daily, routine work.

Civil servants growingly articulate their bureaucratic work alongside sociopolitical polarisation in Turkey (Esmer, 2019; Laebens and Öztürk, 2020) – that is, through their opposition to the government line, bureaucrats capitalise on their professional repertoire and the permanence of documents to preserve their institutional autonomy from what they collectively perceive to be an illegitimate authoritarian onslaught. I observed that civil servants I worked with use their positions and legal-regulatory knowledge to inhibit the influence of their nepotistically installed superiors, whom they consider as neglectful/ignorant of the proper/lawful code of conduct that is inherent to bureaucratic organisations as well as to the democratic governance and the rule of law. Either through their framings of the issue at hand to influence the decisions of their superiors or through explicitly utilising the legal-regulatory stipulations to impede their superiors’ plans, bureaucrats’ politicisation also seems to orient them to work against their own institutions so as to paradoxically preserve their organisation autonomy and capacity.

Bureaucrats’ growing awareness on the importance of rule-of-law issues bring forth an ‘ethical’ duty for them – despite the severity of potential repercussions – to preserve the law and ‘democratic’ processes from authoritarian attrition (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, 2014; Osborne, 1994). This ethico-political fashioning of civil servants permeates not only the politically significant aspects of their work (e.g. elections) but also the minute details that they engage in incessantly (e.g. issuance of certifications, writing instructions or arranging promotion and tenders). The literature on bureaucracy underlines that the very idea of civil service is already configured as the cultivation of ethical selves via occupation of public offices (Osborne, 1994). The findings of this research, however, posit how the formation of moral-political subjectivities is intermingled with actual/ongoing contestations beyond the office and how this political alignment/opposition is posited as ethical stance qua neutrality. Through discussing politics amongst themselves, steering their superiors’ decision-making through their expertise in the legal-regulatory framework, and creating pressure on their superiors through their documentary praxis, civil servants forge themselves as political subjects whose everyday labour both strives to contain an authoritarian-nepotistic government as well as keeping a redemptive future alive through the documentary traces that they meticulously create. The documents, here, not only reorient their superiors towards a legal–fair pathway but also instantiate a promise of a future that is to redeem the injustices of today.

This argument I bring forward engages with the wider articulations around bureaucratic subjectivities and highlights the productive threads generated by mundane bureaucratic routines. Depicted as uncompromising, supposedly rational and overpowering the individual (Weber, 1978; Herzfeld, 1993; Wedel *et al.*, 2005), bureaucracies are widely seen as lethargic and suffocating institutions that have no space for agency (Alexander, 2017; Gupta, 2012; Mathur, 2017). My observations in Istanbul, however, underline the productive pathways unlocked by bureaucratic encounters, routines and procedures, and point out how bureaucrats fashion themselves as ethico-political subjects who subvert, resist and negotiate the enactments of power through such rather mundane, pedantic and trivial practices and

¹⁷Here, in the footsteps of Foucault, I take subjectivation not solely as a ‘subjugation’ but also a crafting of the self through a diverse set of technologies, discourses, appropriations and relations. For a detailed discussion on Foucault’s articulations around subjectivity, see Foucault (1997).

utterances. Although I do not have the data for other bureaucratic settings across Turkey, findings of my research in Istanbul may help us to both rethink our perceptions of bureaucracies and generate new questions to pursue in other settings.

Through following these three interlinked steps, I demonstrate that changing political perceptions of bureaucrats may actually play a considerable role in both enabling and constraining the authoritarian state (Riles, 2006; Feldman, 2008; Navaro-Yashin, 2007b; 2012; Hansen and Stepputat, 2001; Hetherington, 2011) through juxtaposing how nepotistic/cronyistic decisions (especially appointments, procurements or electoral duties) are incorporated into the legal corpus, on the one hand, and how both bureaucrats and the citizenry contest and subvert these decisions through other documentary practices across different platforms (complaints, petitions, lawsuits or leaks to the media).

This exploration of how bureaucrats engage with wider political contestations and forge themselves as ethical agents is important for a number of reasons. First, the findings of this exploration extend the scope of scholarly analyses of street-level bureaucracies through moving away from top-down institutional arrangements to more mundane, everyday dealings in concrete settings. Following Heyman's suggestion to engage in 'rich fieldwork-based information on the workings of *actual* bureaucracies' (2012, p. 1269, emphasis added), this paper reminds the reader of a fundamental aspect of the issue at hand: 'Bureaucracies are peopled' (Lea, 2021, p. 46). This attendance to how people manoeuvre within these organisations allows us to specifically trace how ordinary actors deal with the change, ruptures and destabilisations of authoritarian governance as well as 'how they negotiate all of the conflicting demands made of them, by their clients, their relatives and superiors and the outside agencies' (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, 2014, p. 4).

Understanding how street-level bureaucracies actually operate under authoritarian pressure, I underline, is important to delineate authoritarianism from other modalities of bureaucratic governance (see Olivier de Sardan, 2013). While the corrupt and/or inefficient administrative practices from the Global South are often bundled together to indicate a bureaucratic praxis – what Olivier de Sardan calls as an 'authoritarian administrative culture' that is characterised by the 'production of contempt' (2013, p. 46) – the experiences from contemporary Turkey indicate how street-level bureaucracies posit a rather divergent path from those of post-colonial settings and of rentier states. The findings of my research, in this sense, confirm how, rather than being hollowed-out tentacles of authoritarian politics, bureaucracies may actually gravitate towards anti-authoritarian politics and practices.

Second, ethnographies of the state in contemporary Turkey have long focused on the 'margins inhabited by the stigmatized, dispossessed, and dishonored segments of the populations' (Yonucu, 2017, p. 4; see also Darıcı and Hakyemez, 2019; Das, 2011; Das and Poole, 2004; Yonucu, 2018) while overall neglecting the way state organisations *actually* operate in the everyday (notable exception being Babül, 2017). This tendency to focus on the implications/outputs of the state practices has left the state-as-such largely unexplored – mostly due to difficulties in accessing these secretive and often paranoid organisations (see Babül, 2017). Given the recent transformations of politics and society in Turkey, it is crucial to comprehend how statecraft is made *from within* as well as the ways in which authoritarianism, law and justice are enacted, stretched or constrained through incessant labouring within these organisations. Here, the insights presented by this paper engage with the recent anthropological scholarship on the interrelationship between authoritarian governance and their bureaucratic technologies since the findings from Istanbul demonstrate how authoritarian governance is counteracted by mundane bureaucratic praxis (cf. Olivier de Sardan, 2013) that we often presume to simply enact it.

Third, the findings of this paper demonstrate that bureaucrats are not solely 'intermediaries, who negotiate between the state and' the citizenry (Tarlo, 2001, p. 69), but also, complementing this intermediary role and drawing on it, are active agents who use their official capacity to contain the adverse effects of institutional turmoil, political anxieties and legal destabilisations, all of which my interlocutors described as implications of authoritarianisation. Tracing how bureaucrats cope with the changing juridico-political parameters through their professional repertoire (i.e. their expertise of the canon as well as of archiving, style and processes), this paper provides novel insights into the reworkings of

politics as well as refashionings of political subjectivities within the confines of public offices, underlining how civil servants not only enact and translate the law but also mend, resist and subvert it (see also Mathur, 2015; Eiro, in this issue; cf. Tarlo, 2001).

Doing that, I demonstrate how bureaucratic organisations are far from being apolitical sites and how bureaucrats weave their political subjectivity through coalescing their ‘official and citizenly commitments’ (du Gay, 2005, p. 10). Even though bureaucratic institutions are often considered to be the least likely sites for the cultivation of subjectivity and agency – since anyone working in such organisations is presumed to be subsumed by the overbearing bureaucratic ethos and an expectation of an inflexible adherence to rules and a rigid hierarchy – my observations in Istanbul underline how street-level bureaucrats cultivate agency through this very politicisation and, in the process, strive to preserve their organisation’s institutional autonomy in the face of juridico-political destabilisations and authoritarian influences.

For this reason, the insights brought forward throughout this paper are also to shed light on the everyday workings of street-level bureaucracies under authoritarianism as well as helping us get a better picture of the way the law is ‘translated into practice’ (Mathur, 2015, p. 2) across seemingly mundane practices by bureaucrats. Contributing to ongoing discussions around authoritarianisation and its ramifications for statecraft and the law, the paper also provides insights around the everyday forgings and workings of the state as ‘a translocal institution that is made visible in localized practices’ (Gupta, 1995, p. 376) and how the law is ‘made real’ (Latour, 2002, p. 85) with tangible effects in contexts in which democratic processes and norms are severely contested and undermined.

7 Coda

Bureaucracies permeate modern life across all corners of the world through their incessant issuance of certificates, letters and forms; provision and control of flows goods, people and services; forgings and enforcement of laws and intricate regulations; management and discipline of bodies, individuals, communities and spaces; and reconfigurations of political lexicon and potentialities. In authoritarian contexts, their workings tend to be fatally crucial, since bureaucracies are to police that subjects – both within and outside the organisational contours – abide by the law and are (often erratically) punished in case of breach. And yet, despite the very important fact that ‘it informs every aspect of our existence’, David Graeber (2015, p. 11) underlines in his reflections on its relative obscurity in a contemporary world that ‘[w]e no longer like to think about bureaucracy’. While political contestations and the polarising rhetoric that bureaucratic organisations employ have been fiercely debated by all segments of societies across the world, the organising logic of sociopolitical lives along the bureaucratic-legal principles have become more or less the default modality for the general public everywhere. Maybe because of this normalcy and familiarity, how bureaucratic organisations actually operate, how they affect everyday life and how they occasion spaces of politicisation and agency remain to be analytically accounted for in most contexts.

In the West, their workings have been mostly studied in relation to their colloquial representations as uncompromising, lethargic and often suffocating institutions plagued by red tape (Alexander, 2017; Herzfeld, 1993; Mathur, 2017; Weber, 1978). In the Global South, studies provide more nuanced insights into the everyday workings of bureaucracies (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, 2014), but their focus has generally been the mismatch between the promise of development and the shortcomings of bureaucratic operations, generating an account of ‘what went wrong’ despite a political commitment (e.g. Babül, 2017; Gupta, 2012; Mathur, 2017).

The paper directly engages with ongoing discussions on the reconfigurations of the state in the age of authoritarian ethno-nationalism and its everyday enactments across a wide geography (Chatterji and Mehta, 2020; Gupta, 1995). Contributing to conventional articulations of the state as a disconcerted misarticulation under a shroud of mystery and imagination (Abrams, 1988; Aretxaga, 2003; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000; Coronil, 1997; Navaro-Yashin, 2002; 2012; Taussig, 1992) but offering more about the mundane practices and discourses that generate state effects (see Mitchell, 1999;

Açıksöz, 2020), the research reflects on the ways bureaucratic practices and documents issue forth the state as a praxis, enhance its control and simultaneously conceal its incoherent enactments (Gupta and Sharma, 2006). In addition to attending to the very material ways through which state effects are engendered, the findings of this project also provide novel insights into the workings of the state from an unconventional perspective, which has long been foreclosed to anthropological endeavours. Complementing the arguments of these studies, this paper also presents unprecedented and invaluable insights from within the public institutions through the practices and discourses of those who act in the name of ‘the state’. Through this trajectory, the research aims to ‘further our understandings of the state as a multilayered, contradictory, translocal ensemble of institutions, practices, and people in a globalized context’ (Gupta and Sharma, 2006, p. 6). Focusing on ‘the ideological and material aspects of state construction’ (Gupta and Sharma, 2006, p. 8), I aim to demonstrate how disparate endeavours both issue forth and alter everyday imaginations of the state as well as creating new occasions for legality and political subjectivity.

The findings of this paper are to extend the scope of the scholarly discussions by bringing in how bureaucracies should not solely be thought about via corrupt/failing vs. transparent/efficient binaries, but their workings are to be explored alongside politico-legal disruptions and how bureaucrats cope with such destabilisations. How bureaucracies operate without a stable legal framework as well as the implications of a growing ethno-nationalism, populism and paranoid/conspiratorial outlook on governance (see Bangstad, 2017) emerge as productive tropes to pursue.

I propose to pay closer attention to how, despite the suffocating authoritarian control over administrative institutions, bureaucrats find imaginative ways to exert ever-increasing degrees of autonomy and agency. Threading everyday negotiations and contestations within and across institutional bounds, the project reveals a rather dynamic and heterogenous political ecology in which dissensus, subversion and resistance are rampant.

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