

Analyzing Turkish Government's Racism towards Earthquake Victims

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In times of natural disasters, the response of governmental institutions can often serve as a reflection of their values and priorities. In January 2024, the Turkish Grand National Assembly declined the proposition to extend the search and investigations for the missing children of the 2023 Earthquake. When the one-year mark of the earthquake passed, all missing individuals from the earthquake were declared dead, and this proposition was intended to delay that process. There are many reasons why the Turkish Grand National Assembly declined this proposition. These earthquake areas are highly populated with people from Kurdish ethnicity, they are less resourced, more rural areas, and the proposition is made by the opposition party; these are some factors that affected the decision. This paper aims to critically examine the circumstances surrounding this decision, its political nature, analyze its racial motivations, and explore the similarities between the institutional racism towards Kurdish people in Turkey and the institutional racism towards racialized and indigenous communities in North America.

Turkey is home to many different ethnicities and cultures due to its complicated and long history. Many different ethnic and religious backgrounds live under the same roof, but there are certain areas where some ethnicities are historically more populous, and the February 2023 earthquake area is one of them. The earthquake zone, as well as the eastern side of Turkey, is highly populated with people of Kurdish ethnicity. Throughout the years, Kurdish people have faced difficulties, discrimination, and institutional racism. For example, Kurdish people still, to this day, are oppressed and restricted from using their own language, Kurdish, without stigma. The eastern part of Turkey, especially the high-Kurdish populated areas, are more rural and less resourced. During my travels to the eastern parts of Turkey, I have observed that the local communities lack access to hygiene (schools were so underfunded that hygiene products were inaccessible), clean water, education, and experience poverty and child labor. But why does the

eastern part of Turkey face these difficulties when the western parts don't share similar concerns? I believe the answer to that is institutional racism.

The problems experienced in eastern Turkey are very intertwined and interrelated. When one takes an intersectional approach to the issue, it can be seen that by keeping rural areas underfunded and underdeveloped, education, health, socioeconomic status, employment, and class are affected, contributing to the already existing racial stigma towards Kurdish people. Although this is the reality of Turkey, it's hard to find people who see the reality as it is. I believe this shared experience is evident among racialized people in North America and Kurdish people in Turkey. Many white Americans find it difficult to acknowledge the challenges faced by Black Americans, as doing so would force them to confront uncomfortable truths about themselves and their country (Baldwin, 1985, as quoted in Sholock, 2012, p.709-710). This lack of recognition hinders the acceptance of responsibility, reconciliation for the hardships caused, and the dismantling of colonization and racism. Similarly, to the racial oppression in North America, Kurdish people face similar struggles, and the difficulty of the non-Kurdish population to acknowledge their challenges could perhaps be caused by not wanting to confront the uncomfortable truth that the Turkish government, as well as most of the population, is, in fact, racist.

When the February 2023 earthquake happened in southeastern Turkey, there was a clear lack of help and aid from the government. Nearly all of the aid sent to the earthquake zone was from private parties and voluntary aid from donations and non-profits. The aid organizations that were supposed to help the civilians, sold tents to other non profits who donated them to earthquake survivors (euronews, 2023). Considering that the government has a specific tax for earthquakes which equates to approximately ninety billion Turkish liras (Saç, 2023) as well as a special institution for earthquake aid, AFAD, this was clearly an intentional decision that showed a lack

of care for people affected, as if their lives are disposable. There were many deaths and damages in the earthquake zone, and they were caused by the corruption of the government. In sake of profit, the government and institutions gave construction permits to unsafe work plans and authorized the sales of unsafe housing, which ended up collapsing during the earthquake and took many lives (Ünker, 2023). All of these factors together are a big motivation for the government to cover up all wrongdoings, try to silence the conversation around the earthquake, and decline any extensions for searches and investigations regarding the earthquake. This constant institutional racism toward Kurdish people seems familiar with the experiences of Indigenous communities. In Canada, Indigenous communities suffer the greatest consequences from land exploitation, higher rates of poverty and homelessness, are disproportionately affected by cases of missing and murdered women and bear the brunt of repressive policing and prosecutions within the criminal justice system (Walia, 2012, p.2). Instead of being seen as just one problem among many, Indigenous self-determination is connected to fighting racism, poverty, police violence, war, violence against women, and environmental issues (Walia, 2012, p.2). This connects to the experiences of Kurdish people because their struggle is also linked to broader concepts that require an intersectional approach.

Storytelling can counteract efforts to silence and erase memory, which are part of the structures of power that oppress and destroy identities and communities (Boudreau Morris, 2017, p.461). It connects communities to their land and can help restore dignity by allowing people to speak for themselves, resisting colonialism in the process (Boudreau Morris, 2017, p.463). Remembering can be an act of resistance because the colonial state tries to erase memory and Indigenous knowledge (Salazar as quoted in Boudreau Morris, 2017, p.464). In the face of institutional racism, the response of Kurdish people and people who stand in solidarity with them

was similar to Indigenous communities. They have resorted to storytelling and sharing their stories to enlighten what really happened in the earthquake zone, and many people got informed that way since the government also made attempts to block communication with the area to avoid their institutional racism from getting attention. I believe this is another reason for them to decline the proposition for the extension of search and investigation because they don't want any attention drawn to themselves; they want to cover it up as soon as they can and make people forget what happened.

When comparing Turkey's refusal to extend the search timeline for earthquake victims with Canada's treatment of Indigenous communities, the decision not to search for the bodies of Indigenous women in landfills stands out as a stark example. This refusal to pursue the missing three Indigenous women in Manitoba's landfills underscores the ongoing impact of colonization and the persistent erasure of Indigenous peoples in modern-day Canada. While authorities the police to be unequipped for such a search as the reason for refusal (Taylor, 2023), this explanation appears more like an excuse than a genuine limitation. The fact that law enforcement may not be adequately trained to handle such cases raises serious concerns about the safety and well-being of individuals entrusted to their care by society. How are people going to trust the officers who are working to keep them safe, if they don't even bother to search the landfills to solve cases? The lack of care of Canadian government towards Indigenous communities resemble the attitudes of the Turkish government regarding the earthquake victims, most of whom are from Kurdish descent. Both cases seem to have racial motivations and institutional racism.

In conclusion, the Turkish Grand National Assembly has declined the proposition for extending the search and investigations about the 2023 February earthquake for several reasons. Institutional racism, discrimination against Kurdish people, and governmental corruption are

some explanations for the decision. The struggle of Kurdish people seems familiar with the struggle of racialized and indigenous peoples in North America due to their shared experiences of institutional racism, attempts toward silencing their voices, and constant discrimination resulting in several systems of oppression affecting the community.

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