

TODAY'S ZAMAN

What will the Turkish electorate say at the polls?

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July 21, 2007

One of the most beneficial meetings in Kayseri, where I went upon the invitation from Abdullah Gül, was the one I had with former Kayseri Mayor Şükrü Karatepe. What we talked about at the meeting was meaningful, but what most attracted me were his analyses of the city as a renowned Kayseri resident and social scientist.

When he told me an interesting anecdote about his time as mayor, my first reaction was, "You should let me write about this." I am thankful to him for consenting to my request.

When Karatepe was mayor of the city, a governor, now a well-known political figure, came to Kayseri. Saffet Arıkan Bedük, the new governor who moved from Malatya to Kayseri, wanted to meet with the civilian organizations representing the city. The mayor, chairs of the Chamber of Industry, Chamber of Commerce, Red Crescent, Journalists Association and many others accepted the invitation.

Governor Bedük looked over the guests and called Karatepe to a seat at his left. The governor, who was sitting one level above the other participants, began his speech. At some point, the governor started using demanding language and making open criticisms. Karatepe sensed the unease in the room over the governor's tone and wanted to do something. He even considered pulling the foot of the governor under the table. But as he hardly knew the governor, he couldn't make an estimate on how he would react, so Karatepe gave up.

But he was certain that the people of Kayseri would never endorse such aggressive language. Kayseri is a city that is able to survive due to the efforts of its own people rather than the endowments by the state. Its respect for the state is limitless, but this respect is different to that in a master-slave relationship. It is not a kind of respect that emanates from desperation or necessity.

Following the speech, Karatepe told the new governor everything that made the city different. He even warned that if the governor resorted to the same type of language in the future, nobody would attend his meetings. The governor was very surprised and asked whether these people would come to the Governor's Office seeking for help. The mayor tried to explain the difference about Kayseri. He noted that a high number of entrepreneurs had established factories on their own and achieved remarkable successes in their fields ranging from export records to high levels of employment.

The second meeting with the governor became a test to see whether the mayor or the governor was right. As the meeting approached, Karatepe's phone rang frequently -- each time with people refusing to attend. Karatepe tried

to convince some of them, but couldn't entice them. Karatepe discussed this situation with the governor, who later decided to change his style and be more flexible, leading to meetings that were more democratic and participatory.

My chat with Karatepe made me realize why some Western think tanks have focused on Kayseri, why foreign statesmen wanted to see this city and why hundreds of reporters who came to Turkey to report on the elections went to the city.

You might remember that the European Stability Initiative (ESI) carried on a sociological study in the city two years ago and published a report entitled "Islamic Calvinists -- Change and Conservatism in Central Anatolia" based on their findings. In our meeting, I also learned that Karatepe was the one who proposed the term Islamic Calvinists in the concluding part of the report cited a book by Karatepe, published in 2001. In the book, Karatepe said: "The traditional people of Kayseri spend most of their lives calculating debts, receivables, expenses and incomes. Assertive politics based on miniscule calculations is not possible in a country like Turkey where there is no stable atmosphere. ... Those who consider entering politics should be able to take the risks involved. The average Kayseri people who base their lives on plans and calculations are distant to politics because they are alienated from the risks. Instead of entering politics, they prefer to advance their business."

This study, sponsored by Western institutions, reached the following conclusion: "It is obvious that the economic success and social development created an environment where Islam and modernity coexist without any problem. This is the Anatolia eager to accede to the European Union today."

Actually there are great similarities between the story of Kayseri and today's Turkey, which has made impressive progress since the 1980s. As the Turkish society becomes able to survive in reliance on its own sources, it objects to the Jacobin attitude of the state. Because of its loyalty, it does not want to create tension and turmoil; however, it uses every opportunity to express its dissent or consent through democratic means. Maybe for the first time in the history, our society wants to base its relationship with the state on democratic principles.

Therefore, the best solution will be found when the military and civilian elite curiously examine the nation and its tendencies. If we insist on not understanding this, we will pay for it dearly. My personal opinion is that our nation will give a sound message to the elite. Please, at least this time we should try to understand this message.