

Transforming Socio-Natures in Turkey

Landscapes, State and Environmental
Movements

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The making and remaking of the anti-coal movement in Aliğa, Turkey

*Ethemcan Turhan, Begim Özkaynak,
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Situated 50 kilometers north of Turkey's third-largest city, Izmir, Aliğa is home to shipbreaking and smelting facilities, oil refineries and massive coal-fired power plants. Aliğa Bay – located on the Aegean coast, with abundant scenic landscapes, pristine waters, and archaeologically important sites – was initially designated as a heavy industrial development zone by the 1961 Constitution. This was followed by the establishment of state-owned heavy industries, particularly during the 1980s; namely, PETKİM (petrochemicals) and TÜPRAŞ (oil refinery), despite the potential to develop tourism in the region. Small and medium-scale industries, such as shipbreaking, iron-steel smelting, and cement manufacturing flourished around these two large state-owned facilities, complementing them and serving the domestic and international strategic interests of Turkish governments and industrial groups. Industrial clustering around iron, steel, and cement was later supplemented with fossil fuel-based energy production facilities. Accompanying the years of state-led industrialization, a strong working class grew alongside the facilities in the region. The lack of cumulative impact studies coupled with a diverse set of state-led polluting investments was influential in turning Aliğa and its environs into an “ecological sacrifice zone” (Lerner, 2010). Today, approximately 36 percent of Turkey's crude oil is processed in Aliğa, and ambient levels of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) are four to 20 times higher than suburban locations in the Izmir metropolitan area (Çetin et al., 2003). Cancer risk is high in the region due to these pollutants, at four times the levels considered acceptable by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (Civan et al., 2015).

The Aliğa region has a tumultuous history of social struggles stretching over the past 40 years, with the rise and demise of working-class action against large-scale privatizations, as well as a fierce environmental movement propelled by the local community in tandem with local authorities and national/international networks. One climactic point was the 50,000-strong human chain in Aliğa on May 6, 1990, to protest the planned imported coal-fired power plant. On May 15, 2016, some 26 years later after this fateful campaign, Aliğa became home to a second mass mobilization against coal-fired power plants and coal ash dumpsites. However, this time the framing, repertoire of contention, political context, and

the alliances of the movement were considerably different from the first mobilization, with climate change being a major part of the contemporary anti-coal narrative. Government plans to expand liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals and allow additional coal-fired power capacity and associated ash residue dumpsites on the watershed of nearby villages continue to cause significant dissent among the residents, particularly in Yeni Foça, a district that overlooks Aliğa Bay.

In this chapter, we take a critical look at the historical transformation of grassroots mobilization and political engagement in Aliğa in the period between these two historical moments (1990 and 2016) by using archival material from two national newspapers with wide circulation, secondary literature, and in-depth interviews with some of the key actors. Aliğa appears to be a curious case for neglect in the scholarly literature on environmental activism in Turkey, a history of victories and defeats only partially told. This is particularly relevant and important since the powerful coalition that had emerged in the 1990s (formed by locals, the Green Party [*Yeşiller Partisi*], the main social democratic opposition party in parliament, the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects as well as labor unions) fought and won a major victory giving way to the cancellation of the government's plans and the birth of a combatant environmental movement in the region. Although it was one of the first nationally debated environmental justice successes of this scale in Turkey (Şahin, 2010), anti-coal movement in Aliğa still remains somewhat under-investigated in the country's history of environmental movements. Thus, providing a micro-historical account would not only give the Aliğa anti-coal movement the due credit it deserves, but also help us illustrate the changing nature and shifting contours of environmental mobilizations in Turkey at large in a time of re-escalating authoritarianism. Since "there is not a right or wrong environmentalism, but narratives and practices of environmentalism which are historically produced" (Armiero and Sedrez, 2014: 11), our effort here also helps to reveal some hidden narratives and practices which are equally relevant for contemporary environmental movement in Turkey. To this end, we describe how the hegemonic state – in a counter-movement – reacted to the legal developments and the activism in Aliğa by changing the rules of the game; amending institutional and legal frameworks for investment decisions as needed, thereby speeding up and deepening neoliberal reforms. The tale of the anti-coal struggle in Aliğa presented in this chapter is important for environmental struggles in general, as it offers interesting insights into the ways environmental movements and their counter-hegemonic powers confront, clash, and negotiate with the state just to die out and eventually be reborn.

In terms of research methodology, we coded and analyzed a total of 859 newspaper clippings from two major national newspapers (*Milliyet* and *Cumhuriyet*) and categorized the data into three periods: 1980–1994 (431 clippings), 1995–2004 (128 clippings), and 2005–2015 (300 clippings). We also visited the site several times and conducted multiple interviews with anti-coal movement members. Collating the empirical data, secondary literature, and interviews provided us a rich source of material from which we drew results. The three time periods are strikingly different phases at the national and regional scales, which are all

highly relevant for the anti-coal movement in Aliğa. The first period, from late 1980s to the 1994 economic crisis, corresponds to the first stage of neoliberal restructuring in Turkey. The first energy investment in the Aliğa region – and the ensuing mass mobilization/resistance – also took place during this period. The second period, between 1995 and 2005, is significant due to its coalition governments and the continued albeit slower effects of neoliberal reforms, resulting in political and economic instability and the subsequent economic crises of 1999 and 2001 in Turkey. These political and economic failures were critical in that they were followed by the rise of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP; *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) gaining power in the 2002 elections, which has been the dominant political force in Turkey since then. This latter period is also noteworthy for the new environmental struggles that emerged in Turkey, initially related to mining and hydro-power but now increasingly related to energy metabolism expansion more broadly, crucial to understanding why and how the anti-coal movement in Aliğa was sidelined (Adaman et al., 2017). Finally, the post-2005 period was characterized by a new wave of neoliberal economic reforms led by the powerful AKP regime and mass privatization. This is also the period in which new coal-fired power plant investments loomed large over Aliğa, triggering combatant anti-coal reaction anew. In this context, *Yeni Foça Forum* emerged as a new actor in the region as an offshoot of the 2013 Gezi Park Protests (Özkaynak et al., 2015) and the 2016 Break Free from Fossil Fuels action.¹

In what follows, we first introduce the early phase of the anti-coal movement in Aliğa in two sections that cover the periods from 1980 to 1990 and from 1990 to 1995, respectively. Then, the third section documents the phase between victory and defeat: the 1995–2005 period. An account of the early years of AKP rule and the new dynamics of local struggle in the region between 2005 and 2016 follows in the fourth section. The chapter then concludes by offering some ideas for a synthesis of the continuities and ruptures of the environmental struggle in Aliğa.

When foreign coal comes to town (1980–1990)

Turkey at one stroke left behind the Third World evolutionary phase and entered a new one full of the promises and challenges of modern industrial society.

—Former Prime Minister Turgut Özal (1987)

Coming out of an iron-fisted coup d’état at the beginning of the 1980s, which not only crushed the political left but also enabled and secured the rapid neoliberal transformation of the country’s import-substituting economy, Turkey witnessed radical market-oriented reforms in a largely authoritarian setting throughout the decade (Öniş, 2004; Yalman, 2009; Tonak and Akçay, 2019). Together with the military cadre that led the September 12, 1980 coup d’état, which maintained its control over society for at least two more decades, former Prime Minister (later

President) Turgut Özal was without a doubt the key figure at a time when the country was opening its assets to foreign investors. Özal, himself coming from a technocratic career in State Planning Organization (DPT, *Devlet Planlama Teşkilatı*) with a degree in electrical engineering, made clear that his government would be prioritizing major energy infrastructure investments after he took office in November 1983. About a year into Özal's rule, the first clues of what was in the making were revealed. As of 1984, less than a quarter of the country's primary energy needs for electricity production was import-dependent (TMMOB, 2016). This was also the time when rumors first appeared in mainstream newspapers of the government's plans for three thermal power plants that will run on imported coal. On November 13, 1984, *Milliyet* columnist Mümtaz Soysal (a professor of constitutional law and later Minister of Foreign Affairs) commented:

No one says energy shouldn't be produced. Neither does one say no to thermal power plants. We regard the pollution in the vicinity of Çatalağzı, Aliğa and even Silifke as the presently inevitable cost of producing an industrial Turkey. All that is said is this, indeed: Do we have to put up a thermal power plant in a place with incredible beauty that needs to be protected as a national park for the future generations?

(*Milliyet*, November 13, 1984)

This initial outcry was about the Gökova thermal power plant (completed in the 10 years between 1983 and 1993) running on domestic lignite (630MW), a political move that sparked a sizeable popular opposition. However, there were much larger plans for energy infrastructure to come.

"Turkey will be 40 percent better lit" announced a map published in *Milliyet* (July 7, 1985) showing the approximate locations of three imported coal-fired power plants. Shortly thereafter, the Özal government contracted American company Bechtel to conduct initial feasibility studies for a 600MW plant in Aliğa. Consequently, the remarks from a high-level bureaucrat from State Planning Organization showed what would dominate the newly forming environmental movement's agenda for the coming years: "It is not possible for the coastlines to be polluted by these plants. If we keep saying these kinds of things, it will damage the investments. The Italian-French consortium wants to invest in the already polluted region of Aliğa" (*Milliyet*, August 20, 1986). Now evident, Özal's grand plan was to construct 21 imported coal-fired power plants and 37 domestic lignite-powered plants between 1993 and 2010. In an op-ed to *Washington Quarterly* in 1987, he made his intentions clear: "Here again, we have elaborated a new mode of investment which we call 'build-operate-transfer (BOT), and if you like, hand over'. This approach is accepted by investors and their countries. As a first step, some larger thermal power plants are on the way to realization" (Özal, 1987: 164). Bandwagoning the global narrative of looming energy scarcity from the early 1980s, the Turkish government's simultaneous move to open up the country to global market capitalism and encourage foreign direct investment in the energy sector came to the attention of local authorities in Aliğa and the neighboring town of Yeni Foça

at the beginning of 1987. Designated as a heavy industrial zone following the constitutional change in 1961, Aliğa was already host to a number of polluting facilities including chemical and petrochemical industries, refinery facilities, smelters, and a shipbreaking yard starting from the 1970s and building up further in the first half of the 1980s. After a visit to Ankara, former Aliğa mayor İrfan Onaran reported that “*They are completely sacrificing our region for the sake of a few industries. It is often forgotten that our region is also a tourism zone. There is a French holiday resort right next to the proposed power plant site. We certainly do not want this power plant*” (*Cumhuriyet*, January 17, 1987).

In a time when the labor movement was slowly re-organizing itself after the coup d'état and the new social movements were coming of age, Aliğa swiftly became a site of political contestation over the energy sector. Over the next year, it was slowly revealed that the government had been secretly planning to expand industrial activity, through a coal power plant project constructed and maintained by a Japanese company. This revelation almost immediately led to an unrest in the community. In the summer of 1988, Kemal Anadol, an opposition MP from Izmir and a labor rights lawyer, was responding to local concerns over the designation of a coastal village, Gencelli, during a regular town hall. In his book aptly titled *No to Thermal Power Plants*, he gave a surprising account of his meeting with a local resident:

A citizen came by my side and said “Kemal Bey, please take a look at this map. There is a coal-fired power plant here. This is the important point. The Japanese will be constructing a large plant here. Electricity produced by this plant will be used by the existing and planned privately-owned steel factories. There are rumors that some politicians and their entourage are involved in this.”

(Anadol, 1991: 19)

Anadol took this issue personally and dug into it. The first instances of popular grievances appeared in the media in late 1988, when the then-Minister of Public Works Sefa Giray stripped away the authority of Aliğa and Foça municipalities resisting the smelter facility in the vicinity of Gencelli. Over the next few months in the run-up to March 26, 1989, local elections, the grievances about the complicity of local authorities from Özal's governing party further accelerated and eventually gave way to a landslide victory of the Social Democratic Populist Party (SHP; *Sosyaldemokrat Halkçı Parti*) across 19 municipalities in the region. After the elections, the incoming Minister of Public Works and Housing Cengiz Altinkaya was quoted as saying: “*This is not the only industry being built in the bay. There are 4–5 iron-steel facilities, 28 shipbreaking yards and an oil refinery there. It is already a lost region, what would matter if another factory was built?*” (*Yeni Asır*, June 9, 1989).

The case of the coal-fired power plant got even bigger attention when newspapers started quoting anonymous state officials that the project would be implemented by the Japanese energy utility, EPDC, and coordinated not by the Turkish Electricity Authority (TEK; *Türkiye Elektrik Kurumu*) (formally in charge of

energy investments) but by the DPT's Department of Foreign Direct Investments. Recognizing the gathering political storm, 12 mayors of neighboring municipalities all of whom were from the Social Democratic Populist Party gathered in Gencelli on August 25, 1989, where the residents staged an impromptu roadblock with banners reading: "*We don't want thermal power plant, we want nature to thrive.*" While smaller instances of anti-coal fired power plant activism, mainly led by women, continued, a new phase of the environmental movement kicked off on September 12, 1989, when the State Minister in charge of economic affairs, Güneş Taner, publicly, and finally, confirmed that a thermal power plant running on imported coal would be built by Japanese investors. This declaration became the last nail in the coffin, which then led to the rapid consolidation of Aliğa's anti-coal movement as an unlikely alliance of diverse actors across the country, which was still recovering from the authoritarian regime of the 1980s. Actions became "joyful repertoires of contention" (Della Porta, 2013), with complementary "critical mass"-style direct actions with bicycles and establishing guard posts (November 18, 1989), support visits by famous musicians (December 10, 1989), and even pantomime acts for the villagers (December 11, 1989). The Izmir branch of the Green Party and SOS Akdeniz (a regional NGO) spearheaded the movement by using their media visibility and establishing contacts with international partners from Greece and Germany. They also established a series of popular mass actions that dominated public agenda in Izmir. Ecologist and activist Savaş Emek, a highly influential figure in the Aliğa anti-coal movement and the then-provincial representative of the Green Party, referred to the consolidation of the anti-coal movement in this period as follows: "*The actions [in Aliğa] were all planned step by step. Not everything was done all together. For me, this is the advantage of being a veteran of the socialist tradition, knowing to work in a planned fashion, escalating the fight step by step. We used this to our advantage*" (Şahin and Mert, 2006). Escalating the anti-coal struggle, nonetheless, required a significant coordination not only among actors but also among demands. Thus, this period is also significant for mobilizing "polluter pays" (*Milliyet*, December 17, 1989) arguments conforming with those of global environmentalist movements, in tandem with more radical environmental justice claims such as "*Aliğa is treason against humanity*" (*Milliyet*, May 4, 1990).

Consolidating an anti-coal movement (1990–1995)

One of the Turkish state's fears that surfaced during Aliğa [struggle] was this: If these people rise up against coal-fired power plants, this will make a precedent. Then where would we build power plants?

—Ecologist and activist, Savaş Emek (2015: 135)

The signal flare of what would later be referred to as "*the gospel of getting over with being a silenced community*" by former mayor of Izmir, Yüksel Çakmur (*Milliyet*, May 7, 1990), in Aliğa was effectively lit in the fall of 1989. Partnering up with

a local neighborhood association in Foça, the Turkish Chamber of Mechanical Engineers (MMO; *Türkiye Makine Mühendisleri Odası*) issued a press release in September 1989 emphasizing that Turkey already had an installed capacity of 75 billion kWh of electricity whereas it could only consume 50 billion kWh of it. The logic of build-operate-transfer (BOT) model, the new economic leverage of the Özal government to attract foreign direct investment, was not holding much ground among the local population. Thus, the state institutions decided to play more aggressively. The head of DPT's Department of Foreign Direct Investments, İbrahim Çakır, first suggested that "*there will be no more bureaucratic hurdles to stop Aliğa thermal power plant*" (*Cumhuriyet*, October 30, 1989) and then upped the ante in the face of mounting opposition, saying "*the Aliğa thermal plant, which will be built by 70 percent Japanese capital will not cause any environmental damage*" (*Cumhuriyet*, November 24, 1989). While the popular opposition was growing, the Council of Ministers issued a governmental decree on October 18, 1989, officially announcing the establishment of a joint venture company (70 percent Japanese, 30 percent Turkish capital) for the construction and operation of the proposed power plant. The key legal trick here was the use of the free trade zone law, which in essence was meant to facilitate land allocation for export-oriented purposes. Yet somewhat contradictorily, the Aliğa-Gencelli power plant would become the country's first plant running on imported coal, burning coal arriving from places as far as Australia, South Africa, and Colombia as well as being mainly owned by foreign investors. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the emerging opposition was not easy to convince about the benefit of the plan and thus came the storm of court cases led by lawyers from Izmir Bar Association (*İzmir Barosu*) and Kemal Anadol himself to the Council of State (*Danıştay*). Anadol would later refer to this legal move as the "*never-ending fight*," the first instance of organized citizen reaction in the aftermath of the bloody 1980 coup (Anadol, 1991: 35).

As the legal fight was gaining steam, the mayors of 12 municipalities in the region organized under the umbrella of the Bakırçay Municipalities Union (*Bakırçay Belediyeler Birliği*) and started collaborating with activist groups. The first mass act of opposition from this group came in early November 1989 in the shape of a referendum on the thermal power plant. The Aliğa mayor, Hakkı Ülkü, described this move as "*the first urban citizen referendum in republican history*" (*Cumhuriyet*, November 16, 1989). The results of 7,717 votes cast were self-explanatory with 94 percent "No!" response in what could be referred to as the first act of direct democracy on an environmental matter in the country (Figure 9.1). Consequently, the outcome did not go uncontested since the Ministry of Interior immediately started a formal investigation into the Bakırçay Municipalities Union for extra-legal use of authority in organizing a popular referendum without the central government's consent. Feeling the growing dissent, local organizers and SOS Akdeniz also reached out to Greek social democrats, thereby leading three Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) deputies to pose a parliamentary question to the Greek Minister of Interior on the potential impacts of coal-fired power plants on the island of Lesbos right across the Aliğa Bay (*Cumhuriyet*, December 10, 1989). By the end of the year, the undersecretary



Figure 9.1 Popular referendum on coal-fired power plants organized by Foça Municipality on November 15, 1989

Source: Photo courtesy of Ümit Otan

for the environment, Zeynep Arat, commented that “*there has never been an environmental assessment [in Aliğa]. We need to be smart and ask for a package deal. Otherwise, they will first sell us the power plant and then the [waste] treatment facilities*” (Cumhuriyet, December 4, 1989).

In a parliamentary session on February 28, 1990, Kemal Anadol took the floor to have a heated debate with the Minister of Energy, Fahrettin Kurt, who appeared to be the fiercest defendant of the proposed coal-fired power plant in Aliğa. Hidden between the lines was that the coal ash produced as a result of burning imported coal was to be transferred to an ash dump site 3 km away from the plant in closed vessels. The government argued that this ash would be stored there for 26 years before the zone was to be rehabilitated and transformed into a recreational zone (or even an agricultural zone in some accounts) (Anadol, 1991: 67–76). Moreover, the Minister was openly admitting that Aliğa was selected as “*it was designated as an industrial zone and already hosted 27 industries,*” clearly neglecting the possible cumulative impact of these industries (Ibid.: 72). However, it was not only the Turkish government that was deeply concerned by the growing distaste with the project but also the Japanese company EPDC so as to even prompted an official visit by the Japanese Prime Minister (Milliyet, April 30, 1990).

All these eventually culminated in the emblematic direct action on May 6, 1990. Benefiting from the support of Izmir Metropolitan Municipality and Bakırçay Municipalities Union, the organizing committee led a 50,000-people strong human chain action. With participants from cities as far as Adana, Samsun, and Trabzon, the human chain (also dubbed “Love Chain”) action sparked much larger attention despite the fact that the state-run TV channel TRT broadcasted a documentary film greenwashing Japanese coal-fired power plants the night before the action (*Cumhuriyet*, May 7, 1990). Radical demands on banners such as “*We are not voters anymore, we are citizens,*,” “*Bleachers to the fields, democracy to the streets,*” and “*Coal-fired power plants are the enemies of humanity*” were important signposts showing the narrative reach of the movement (Ibid.). The good news finally arrived on May 8, 1990, two days after the mass action, when the Council of State announced a stay of execution decision for the proposed power plant. While the victory celebrations were on, nonetheless, the state officials were quick to declare that “*the investment plans were not annulled*” (*Milliyet*, May 8, 1990). With an emergency decree on May 10, 1990, after an extraordinary meeting between the Japanese company and President Özal, the government opened another legal channel for the investment by expanding the borders of the Aliğa free trade zone. Confronting Kemal Anadol in parliament the following day, the Minister of Public Works, Cengiz Altınkaya, commented that “*the street protests will not change our determination. If, as the government, we allow things to be handled by the streets then we would have to give up on all power plants in Turkey*” (*Milliyet*, May 11, 1990).

Emboldened by the initial stay of execution decision from the higher court, the legal fight in Aliğa accelerated along with the reciprocal war of words between the anti-coal movement and the state. Furthermore, desertion of the Minister of Tourism İlhan Aküzüm to anti-coal ranks gave further impetus to this legal-institutional component of the movement. After a legal ping pong that made the Japanese counterparts anxious, a company spokesperson even shifted to blackmailing: “*Aliğa needs to be finished as initially planned. After all, this is your problem. We would wait a bit more but not much. It is hard to invest in Turkey. Abandoning Aliğa [power plant project] would have unpleasant side effects. Maybe there was not much opposition, they were not so numerous but they have been effective. The fate of this project will be the benchmark for future Japanese investments*” (*Milliyet*, January 21, 1992). Yet, the times they were a-changin’. After 10 stay of execution decisions over two years, the Council of State finally annulled the second decree of the government on April 28, 1992, on the grounds of “*ecological equilibrium.*” This ruling prompted different legal interpretations from lawyers and environmental activists attributing a moral higher ground to the court by suggesting that its decision was to “*put ecology before the national interest,*” although not everyone was in agreement on this (*Cumhuriyet*, May 5, 1992). Eventually, it was Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel who knocked down the project with a flamboyant press statement on his way back from the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, where three major international environmental agreements (UNFCCC, UNCCD, and UNCBD) were launched. Riding the global wave of environmental optimism,

Demirel commented that the Aliğa coal-fired power plant project will not continue and even went as far as to call the ongoing coal-fired power plant construction in Gökova “murder” (*Cumhuriyet*, June 16, 1992). Kemal Anadol would later refer to this victory as the success of “a civilian movement which will end the ill-fate of Turkey and put an end” to the authoritarian regime marked by the March 12, 1971, and September 12, 1980, coup d’états (*Milliyet*, June 21, 1992). Disappointed by the cancellation, the Japanese EPDC started to seek compensation for its “10 million USD loss” (*Cumhuriyet*, June 22, 1992).

Between victory and defeat (1995–2005)

The case of the power plant in İzmir Aliğa is a pity. That was a green power plant but didn't suit some people's book. In fact, Turkey will be facing energy scarcity in 1995–96.

—Former president Turgut Özal (*Milliyet*, August 8, 1992)

The legal turn of the Aliğa anti-coal movement proved to be a winning card in the 1990s, mainly because it was not the solitary effort of a single organization, rather, it brought together a diverse set of actors that formed a broad supporter base (including municipalities, citizen groups, NGOs, academics, and professional chambers). Consequently, one of the victories of the movement in Aliğa was this merger of different opposition groups over an environmental justice claim. According to one of the lawyers of the movement, this was a somewhat organic process: “As the movement strengthened, there was more press coverage, which further enhanced participation in the movement, and everyone began to express themselves in that environmental movement” (Interview on April 24, 2017). Along these lines, even the Aegean Region Chamber of Industry (EBSO; *Ege Bölgesi Sanayi Odası*) – an important regional actor for industry representatives – eventually had to take the claims of the movement seriously and participate in local meetings held a number of times to better comprehend the communities’ environmental concerns. It is therefore remarkable that a formal mediation process including 62 different stakeholders in Aliğa was conducted between December 1996 and May 1997 (Müezzinoğlu, 2000). Despite the carefully designed process exploring multiple contested issues (including land use, pollution sources, air-water-soil quality, and new energy projects), the final results, including the use of long-term cumulative strategic EIAs (Environmental Impact Assessment), were “not reflected in a definite management or implementation program” (Ibid.: 56).

Needless to say, there were also certain national and global circumstances that supported the anti-coal movement and helped bring about the successful outcome of stopping the coal-fired power plant. Looking at these structural influences together with the local factors is helpful in explaining why a communitarian gathering, followed by a legal victory, happened then and there. Our analysis identified three sets of interrelated forces that facilitated this collective outcome. The first set was the post-1980s political atmosphere in Turkey, where personal and political freedoms were expanding and civic mobilization was (re)

gaining force around issues such as gender, human rights, and the environment in the aftermath of the brutal military coup that severely curtailed democratic rights and mechanisms for political participation. Our respondent from the Aliğa anti-coal movement also echoed this sentiment and said, “*The Özal administration’s attitude towards this local movement was not harsh. There was a tolerant, liberal environment*” (Interview on April 24, 2017). The second set of concerns included the neoliberal restructuring and governance trends at the global level that were quite new and assumed an increasingly significant role for civil society participation (as also emphasized by the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 on the environmental front), and hence still allowed for some push back with regard to privatization and deregulation. Also of note is the fact that neoliberal ideology in Turkey had not yet become as influential in the broader social field in the early 1990s. At the time, governments were still relatively slow with the privatization program as they did not want to lose full control, labor and trade unions were still around and alive, and the size and depth of the capital market was limited. Finally, the third set of forces was related to the international popularity of the sustainable development and Local Agenda 21 discourse again in the 1990s, which put pressure on national states with regard to both local and international environmental issues.

While Prime Minister Demirel’s statement discarding the project at first seemed like great news to Turkish environmentalists, counter-statements from the state officials arrived quickly – and perhaps unsurprisingly. For instance, the General Director for Environmental Impact Assessment under the Ministry of Environment, Murat Sungur, commented that “*cessation of the project was not due to it being a coal-fired power plant but due to the legal hurdles related with the free trade zone*” (*Cumhuriyet*, July 5, 1992). Since this period also coincided with the time that the consolidating environmental movement in Turkey was throwing its weight behind the anti-nuclear struggle in Akkuyu and anti-gold mining in Bergama, the new conservative government was therefore even more adamant to suggest that they will “*launch an intense campaign to deploy a counter pro-thermal narrative in the media to prevent environmental reactions*” (*Cumhuriyet*, November 10, 1996).

Overall, throughout the 1990s the burgeoning environmental movement was keen on bolstering the power of local agency through cooperation and networks, such as the alliance between labor unions and environmentalists, strong relations with international counterparts, and collaborations with academia. As a result, environmental resistance in the Aegean region continued on diverse fronts in the 1990s (industrial pollution and oil spills, shipbreaking, rapid urbanization in coastal areas, overfishing and the protection of seals) with mainly non-violent strategies (court appeals, appeals against the environmental impact assessment, alternative reports, data collection of health impacts and collaboration between scientists and activists, workers’ festivals, petition campaigns, marches from Izmir to Aliğa to Bergama, Greek-Turkish environmental meetings, etc.). Human rights, democracy, and rule of law were also among the largely credible and widely used themes in opposition discourses generated in reference to the anti-democratic practices of the governments that served throughout the decade. Indeed, the spectrum of such discourses and tactics reflect a continuum between

resistance strategies of the environmental movements in Turkey in the 1990s (Orhan, 2006; Arsel, 2012; Özen and Özen, 2018). However, the rapid urbanization and the domination of middle-class values in this period also undermined the possibilities of an alternative political strategy that contrasted clearly to the mainstream politics ferociously criticized by the environmental movement (Özlüer et al., 2016).

In the 1990s, one particular mobilization in close vicinity to Aliğa gained nationwide public sympathy. It took place in Ovacık, Bergama, against the operations of Eurogold, a multi-national company and subsidiary of Australia's Normandy Mining Ltd. (see Yaşın, in this volume). This was the very first anti-gold mining mobilization following the opening of the Turkish mining to foreign investments in 1985 in line with liberalization policies. While the struggle of the villagers did attract popular attention, the anti-mining discourse's emphasis on Eurogold being a foreign company to some extent overshadowed the local movement's stand against the negative environmental effects of mining operations and, perhaps more importantly, the broader neoliberal capitalist structure that gives way to such operations by both national and foreign companies (Özen and Özen, 2018). Moreover, the unexpected popularity of this movement somewhat eclipsed the success of the Aliğa struggle and diverted attention from energy investment-related controversies to gold-mining operations and cyanide pollution in the region, and to imperialism at large.

One key weakness of the protest movements in this period was their lack of imagination in developing and explicitly articulating an alternative vision in the face of foreign capital investments that promised local and national economic development. Preoccupied with continuous daily shocks and struggles, these movements – while successful in expressing their discontent with the proposed projects and plans – had neither enough time nor energy to situate their discourses in a positive framework. This limited their capability to counter the dominant discourses on development and national interests, which were seen as strongly tied to the economic contributions these projects would generate for the region and the country. In Aliğa, the hegemonic modernist discourse centered on looming energy scarcity from the 1980s onwards; offsetting this discourse and offering alternative energy policies and management practices would have been crucial for the long-term viability of the resistance.

Somewhat counter-intuitively, the tale of Aliğa does not end with the local people's victory and living happily ever after. The fact that the state did not grant an excavation permit for the ancient city of Kyme in the outskirts of Aliğa was an early signal of its reluctance to protect the region's historical and ecological wealth and its plans for the future of the area. Environmental movement lawyers (ÇHA; *Çevre Hareketi Avukatları*) interpreted this decision as a “complete massacre” (*Cumhuriyet*, May 17, 1997). Later, three major economic crises Turkey experienced in less than a decade – in 1994, 1999, and then in 2001 – provided grounds for the state to react to the success story and activism in Aliğa, in typical hegemonic counter-movement fashion. That is, response measures changed the rules of the game – the institutional and legal frameworks – step by step. The

first major crisis of the neoliberal era in 1994 was relatively mild, and its ability to dismantle the opposition was rather limited. In contrast, the 2001 crisis constituted a key turning point as it helped discredit the pre-existing policy regime, helped grow the neoliberal wing of the Turkish economic bureaucracy, and both undermined and marginalized the statist opposition to large-scale privatization and deregulation reforms (Öniş, 2004, 2011). Intensified clashes between the national armed forces and Kurdish insurgents in Southeastern Turkey pushed ethnic struggles onto Turkey's main political agenda, which further weakened the environmental opposition.²

Indeed, Turkey experienced a major economic liberalization and privatization boom in the aftermath of the 2001 crisis. The country's transformation into a neoliberal economy gained momentum with the privatization of state-owned critical infrastructures. One of the most concrete outcomes of this process has been the shift in the energy sector, where the majority of energy production and transmission passed from the public sector to the private. Many previously state-owned enterprises were privatized in the aftermath of the 2001 crisis – most notably state-owned assets such as the oil company, Petrol Ofisi, in 2002, and the TÜPRAŞ oil refinery in 2005. On the energy front, the government also embarked on a large privatization effort by signing 49-year leases with private firms, granting them usage rights over small rivers and coal mines and enabling them to build and operate hydro and coal power plants (Harris and Işlar, 2013). Unfortunately, implementation of the neoliberal reforms in Turkey was associated with a weakening of the bureaucracy of the state apparatus, arguably with costly consequences. Forgotten for about a decade, the plans for increased coal-fired power capacity in Aliğa resurfaced in the aftermath of this period.

Back to the future in Aliğa (2005–2016)

When we meet an investor, they say they will invest but they do not want to crawl at the gates of Ankara [bureaucracy]. So, as the government, we want to solve these issues regarding the permit processes and offer the projects to the investors in a boneless bite, so to speak.

—Former Minister of Energy, Berat Albayrak (April 21, 2016)³

On April 21, 2016, just one day before the official signing ceremony of the Paris Agreement in New York, the Minister of Energy Berat Albayrak (also, the son-in-law of President Erdoğan) met with journalists in Ankara to talk about Turkey's energy strategy. He promised that the “*bureaucratic obstacles*” blocking capital investment in thermal power plants would be removed and these investments would be presented to the investors on a silver plate, or as he puts it, as “*boneless bites*.” One such obstacle was the already-decapitated EIA permit process – not the uncertainty of the future of coal in the afterwards of the Paris Agreement as it is in the world. Thus, it is quite telling that after signing the Paris Agreement in New York the next day, the Turkish Minister of Environment Fatma Güldemet

Sarı rushed to the opening of a major lignite-fired power plant in Adana together with President Erdoğan.⁴

Less than a month later, a new mass demonstration took place in Yeni Foça, in the vicinity of Aliğa. Around 2,000 demonstrators consisting of local citizen groups, political parties, national NGOs, and mayors descended on Yeni Foça on May 15, 2016, this time following the call by Initiative Against Fossil Fuels (FYKI, *Fosil Yakıt Karşıtı İnişiyatif*). The demonstration was organized by a local community group in tandem with local authorities but also had a significant back-up by professional environmental groups such as 350.org, European Climate Foundation, and TEMA Foundation (*Türkiye Erozyonla Mücadele Ağaçlandırma ve Doğal Varlıkları Koruma Vakfı* – Turkish Foundation for Combating Soil Erosion, for Reforestation and the Protection of Natural Habitats). The visibility of this event in the run-up to the demonstration proved to be a major instance of revival and remembrance of the memories of earlier anti-coal struggles in Aliğa, with the local movement even appearing in an international documentary film titled *Disobedience*.⁵ We contend that such continuities between the mobilizations in 1990 and 2016 help highlight the dynamic of action and reaction between the authoritarian neoliberalism (Tansel, 2018) unleashed by Erdoğan’s government and the environmental activists fighting back at local and national scales under transforming political and economic contexts.

During the last decade, strong incentives such as exemption from environmental legislation, highly lucrative subsidy schemes, and generous treasury guarantees were provided for the domestic coal investments, whose return on investments now looked questionable, considering the shift in the global outlook on climate issues after the Paris Agreement. This has however not stopped imported-coal investments, which drive Turkey’s worrying current account deficit (Cardoso and Turhan, 2018). Being aware of this trajectory, the government made an amendment to the Energy Market Law in June 2016, which delivered dispatch priority and a purchase guarantee for the electricity generated by power plants using domestic lignite. This policy was intended mainly to keep power companies that have bought existing state-owned coal-fired power plants solvent and to convince the private sector to invest in new lignite power plant projects (Çiftçi et al., 2016). As a result of these neoliberal policies, the share of the privately owned installed electricity capacity – once below the publicly owned capacity – now constitutes more than 75 percent of the total installed capacity in the country.⁶ Coal-fired power plants and associated conflicts have been at the forefront of this shift (Arsel et al., 2015).

All this economic and political transformation at the national level also took its toll on the Aliğa region. The once state-led industrialization in the region is now conducted solely by the private sector (in a rather blatant way). Both the state-owned petrochemical industry and the oil refinery were finally privatized in May 2008 despite lengthy protests by the labor union Petrol-İş (once also active in the anti-coal movement) and the ongoing court process against the privatization. After buying PETKİM, SOCAR⁷ also bought a whole peninsula in Aliğa, which had “14 plants, 8 common facilities, power plant,

waste treatment plant and a naval port” (*Cumhuriyet*, May 30, 2018). Clearly, SOCAR’s primary aim was not to acquire the now-aging machinery and plants of PETKİM but to get their hands on the valuable land in the area to transform the region into a “strategic enterprise zone” (Levent, 2018). Their intentions were demonstrated by one of their first decisions to build an oil refinery and a new 672MW coal-fired power plant on the peninsula.⁸ While the plans for another 800MW power plant were shelved due to cancellation of the EIA report by the local court, new coal-fired power capacity of 350MW by İZDEMİR (Izmir Steel and Iron Corp.) emerged in 2009. Despite local resistance, this latter power plant was eventually built and started operating in 2014 while court cases were still ongoing.⁹

Aliğa: *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose?*

As we were finalizing this chapter, we received news that ministerial approval of EIA reports for two coal-fired power plant projects in Aliğa (one owned by İZDEMİR and the other by SOCAR) were overturned by the local court for the fourth time – annulling the investments on the basis of lack of cumulative impact assessment (diken.com.tr, 2019). Today, carcinogenic risks due to lifetime exposure to volatile organic compounds (half of which may be attributed to petrochemical industries, see Civan et al., 2015) in the Aliğa region are “substantially higher than the acceptable level” (Dumanoğlu et al., 2014). In the context of these developments, recounting the story of the past and present anti-coal struggles in Aliğa is helpful for understanding both the socio-economic and political transformation of Turkish society as well as the broader histories of rise and fall of environmentalism in Turkey during the last three decades. In a certain sense, it goes to show how a relatively closed country in its early stages of industrialization opened up to the world and went from a state-led, import-substituting economy into a liberal one first, and then a neoliberal one, while politically oscillating from an authoritarian regime to a relatively liberal one and then back to authoritarianism. This cautionary tale can also be read as the story of erosion of rule of law in emerging, semi-periphery countries in the past 30 years (Saatçioğlu, 2016). In a sense, Aliğa mobilizations in the 1990s set the environmental protest precedent by supplementing its mass mobilization with a strong legal advocacy and therefore provided a coherent paradigm around “environmental rights as human rights,” “rule of law,” and “democracy” and a repertoire of action for the coming environmental movements such as the Bergama anti-mine struggle (Özen and Özen, 2018). The emergence of the pro-bono legal group, ÇHA from the Aliğa anti-coal struggle has furthermore shaped the next two decades of environmental movements in Turkey. Praised with a newspaper coverage aptly titled “Name: Lawyer, Surname: Environmentalist” (*Cumhuriyet*, June 7, 1995), this group eventually led to the formation of a nationally coordinated group, ÇEHAV (Lawyers of Environmental and Ecologist Movements, *Çevre ve Ekoloji Hareketi Avukatları*).¹⁰ Needless to say, the rise of the

anti-coal movement in Aliğa, in former mayor Nihat Dirim's words, meant more than solely defense of the local environment:

The residues of the coup d'état on September 12th, 1980 were being slowly washed away. [The coup] not only crushed those on the left but also many other parts of the society, a great oppression and fear haunted [the people]. [. . .] Here, we started a social movement with the leadership of municipalities but it went beyond that. The community embraced it and found a space in which it could express itself.
(Interview on April 25, 2017)

This micro-history of the anti-coal movement in Aliğa also allows us to unravel the continuities, ruptures, and tipping points in the action-reaction continuum between the state and environmental movements in Turkey. In doing so, it also helps better situate the emergence, evolution, and transformation of the environmental movement in Aliğa and beyond. First, it is clear that there is a strong continuity in the environmental movement through actors and in their repertoires of actions – despite significantly altered relations with the state and the legal system. Many of the current activists remember and long for the 1990s events and their tactics shows a resemblance. For example, in several instances, activists tried to re-create the emblematic human chain action against the coal-fired power plants. In that regard, the environmental activism in the region is still nostalgically reactive, rather than proactive. Second, regarding continuity in the state's policy, it is seen that the neoliberal ambitions of the 1990s are still here albeit now more hostile and unchained from legal hurdles, with the erosion of rule of law in the country. Third, the 1990s discourse that energy scarcity in the country should be immediately addressed is still the dominant *leitmotiv* in 2010s with a twist of “authentic and national energy” (Erensü, 2018).

Despite this aforementioned oscillation between victory and defeat, the emergence of networked grassroots environmental groups offers a glimpse of hope. Following the Gezi Park protest episode in 2013, which culminated in the formation of different neighborhood forums (Uğur-Çınar and Gündüz-Arabacı, 2018; Özdüzen, 2019) across Turkey, local residents upset with being the backyard of the ever-expanding Aliğa industrial area, formed *Yeni Foça Forum* to go beyond a single-issue movement. This new organization, the result of an important reflection process that looked both to the past and to the future, has both produced a discursive and material transformation in the region by claiming to “defend life” (*yaşamı savunmak*) beyond the polluting fossil fuel projects. Despite the limitations due to its rather small member base, the movement's active and openly political stance against polluting investments and active engagement with all other actors has given them leverage to amplify their message. *Yeni Foça Forum* today is an active constituent of the regional platform EGEÇEP (Aegean Environment and Culture Platform, *Ege Çevre ve Kültür Platformu*) and of the national platform Ecology Union (*Ekoloji Birliği*) and has since formed numerous national and international alliances. International NGOs and their national associates (i.e., 350.org and Climate Action Network Europe to name some) are

increasingly interested in the region to amplify their messages of climate justice by using Aliğa as an important flashpoint of struggle and advocacy. Pro-bono judicial activism of lawyers from ÇEHAV has also been an important milestone for the Yeni Foça Forum to break away with the financial constraints of due legal processes.

As Knudsen (2016: 322) also concludes in his study of environmental opposition against energy investments in Turkey, informal organization of environmental movements in the country provides opportunities to organize quickly and flexibly “without actually having to comply with any legal requirements and confining procedures.” While this flexibility allows them to fly under the radar of the state, thereby rendering environmentalism among the most effective critiques of neoliberal developmentalism (Arsel, 2012), it also gives them the possibility of eventually coming back to fight through multiple and renewed alliances. Like other developing countries, energy has particularly been an important field for environmental movements in the country since it helped politicize environmental movements in Turkey in the aftermath of the 1980 coup – as it allowed politically active individuals and organizations to join forces with local authorities, labor unions, and professional chambers with no previous environmental activism history (Adem, 2005). The anti-coal struggle in Aliğa has particularly been instrumental and arguably pioneered the “legal turn” of environmental activism in Turkey, holding the state accountable for environmental injustices through multi-faceted efforts (Ibid.: 77). Nonetheless, the winning card in Aliğa was the joint effort of “the streets with the parliament, the legal fight with the political fight” in building an ecologist and internationalist narrative (Şahin, 2010).

Kadirbeyoğlu et al. (2017) reiterates that the Turkish state’s largely uncompromising position today pushes environmental organizations to make strategic choices with subsequent implications. In a similar fashion, the neoliberalization of Turkey’s energy regime and its transformation under Erdoğan’s rule proved that not only the state had a comeback as a strong player in the past decade and a half (through synchronizing political, legal, and economic relations with the party-state’s preferences) but, also, now it is unafraid to use “heavy-handed legal and extra-legal tools” (Erensü, 2018). Ultimately, confronting an authoritarian neoliberal state unafraid to use coercion and vilification tactics where rule of law does not exist anymore requires environmental justice movements to be propositional as much as oppositional using different and multi-faceted repertoires of contention (Temper et al., 2018a). This, we argue, echoes the calls for resistance-centered perspectives on socio-ecological transformation (Temper et al., 2018b). At this junction, one important question is whether the political pendulum will oscillate back to democratic principles, grounded in the rule of law after the inevitable dissolution of the current authoritarianism. And if this does occur, the question of how the environmental movement will take part in this transformation has no clear-cut answers. Nonetheless, it is clear that local agency has and will continue to have influence over national policies. At the end of the day, it

is this agency that will define what type of afterlives environmental movements could have after victories and defeats, towards the political possibilities of common, sustainable, and just futures.

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Notes

- 1 Led by climate activism group 350.org and involving a wide range of international, national, and local organizations, Break Free 2016 mobilizations supported 20 popular mobilizations across six continents. Aliğa was one of these 20 sites. <https://breakfree2016.org/>
- 2 Any environmentally related social concern would, of course, remain marginal compared to the scale of Kurdish conflict in Turkey.
- 3 “Kılçıksız yatırım imkanı sunacağız” (We will provide opportunities of boneless investments), Sabah Gazetesi, 21/04/2016, www.sabah.com.tr/ekonomi/2016/04/21/kilciksiz-yatirim-imkani-sunacagiz (Accessed: 30/01/2019)
- 4 “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan Tufanbeyli Termik Santrali'ni açtı” (President Erdoğan opened the Tufanbeyli Thermal Power Plant) – CNN Türk, 24/04/2016, www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-tufanbeyli-termik-santralini-acti (Accessed: 30/01/2019)
- 5 Another anti-coal demonstration took place in Aliğa in May 2012, organized by a diverse set of national, regional, and local civil society actors and political parties. However, the Break Free mobilization in 2016 was made internationally visible; thanks to the communication support provided by European Climate Foundation and 350.org, see <http://watchdisobedience.com/> (Accessed: 30/01/2019)
- 6 TEİAŞ (Turkey Electricity Transmission Company), Electricity Generation & Transmission Statistics of Turkey, www.teias.gov.tr/T%C3%BCrkiyeElektrik%C4%B0statistikleri/istatistik2015/istatistik2015.htm [Accessed 09.03.2017]
- 7 SOCAR is an Azerbaijan-owned oil company and one of the world's 50 largest oil companies. The company is also the biggest direct foreign investor in Turkey.
- 8 Similarly, the company built a wind power plant of installed capacity of 51MW on the peninsula between 2014 and 2017, and announced plans for building a thermal power plant. SOCAR even tried to sideline potential local opposition by taking the chiefs (*muhtar*) of the nearby villages on an all-paid trip to Germany to show how similar “clean” power plants operated.
- 9 “3 kez ÇED raporu iptal edilen İzdemir termik santraline onay verildi”, *Evrensel*, 11/12/2018, www.evrensel.net/haber/368130/3-kez-ced-raporu-iptal-edilen-izdemir-termik-santraline-onay-verildi (Accessed: 02/02/2019)
- 10 Çevre ve Ekoloji Hareketi Avukatları (ÇEHAV), see <http://cehav.org/>

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