



A Call to End Corruption:

One Minute of Darkness for Constant Light

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Disclaimer

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the New Tactics in Human Rights Project or its funders. The project does not advocate specific tactics or policies.

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April 2003

Dear Friend,

Welcome to the New Tactics in Human Rights Tactical Notebook Series! In each notebook a human rights practitioner describes a tactical innovation that was successful in advancing human rights. The authors are part of the broad and diverse human rights movement, including educators, librarians, health care workers, law enforcement personnel, and women's rights advocates. They have developed tactics that not only have contributed to human rights in their home countries. In addition, they have utilized tactics that when adapted can be applied in other countries and other situations to address a variety of issues.

Each notebook contains detailed information on *how* the author and his or her organization achieved what they did. We want to inspire human rights practitioners to think *tactically* to reflect on the tactics they have chosen to implement their larger strategy and to broaden the realm of tactics considered to effectively advance human rights.

In this notebook, we read about how mass numbers of people – 30 million people – in Turkey turned off and on their lights to demand that the government act against corruption. Government corruption had been an open secret. Yet, the public felt apathetic about being able to change the situation. The Campaign of Darkness for Light gave people an easy and no-risk action everyone could take – simply turning off their lights at the same time each evening – and thus show their displeasure with the system. Such a simple action – a flick of the switch – and yet when people saw that their neighbors had turned off their lights, too, they felt the power of their collective voices and began to invent their own ways to speak out by gathering on the streets, marching and banging pots and pans. This deceptively simple tactic carried out in a mass numbers sent a powerful signal that the public was calling for an end to corruption in Turkey.

The entire Tactical Notebook Series will be available online at www.newtactics.org. Additional notebooks will continue to be added over time. On our web site you will also find other tools, including a searchable database of tactics, a discussion forum for human rights practitioners, and information about our workshops and symposium. To subscribe to the New Tactics e-newsletter, please send an e-mail to newtactics@cvt.org.

The New Tactics in Human Rights Project is an international initiative led by a diverse group of organizations and practitioners from around the world. The project is coordinated by the Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) and grew out of our experience as a creator of new tactics and a treatment center that also advocates for the protection of human rights from a unique position—one of healing and reclaiming civic leadership.

We hope that you will find these notebooks informational and thought provoking.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kate Kelsch".

Kate Kelsch
New Tactics Project Manager

Ezel Akay

Ezel Akay was born in 1961. He graduated from Bosphorus University Faculty of Mechanical Engineering. In 1989, he established a film production company. He has shot commercials and music videos, and has produced three feature films. He married in 1992 and is the father of a four-year-old boy.

Citizen Initiative

One Minute of Darkness for Constant Light Campaign, headed by the Citizen Initiative, started with an idea proposed by Ergin Cinmen, a lawyer, to a group of friends and fellow activists including Mebuse Tekay, a lawyer, Yuksel Selek, a sociology teacher and Ersin Salman, who works in the publishing and advertising industry. Many others from a different walks of life and professions also volunteered with the Citizens Initiative.

The Initiative has a contact office and a Web site made possible through personal contributions and donations. Later, an association with the aim to support the Citizen Initiative was established in order to raise and manage funding resources for the group's activities.

During the campaign, the Citizen Initiative collaborated with professional chambers and associations, such as Istanbul Dentists Chamber, Pharmacists Trade Association and Financial Advisers Chamber, which in turn facilitated the involvement of their network across the country.

Following the One Minute of Darkness for Constant Light campaign, the Citizen Initiative began organizing other campaigns on relevant issues such as the lifting of jurisdictional immunities for MPs and civil servants. Following the Marmara Earthquake in August 1999, the Citizen Initiative, using the same office and its network of contacts, coordinated relief and rehabilitation work. These post-quake activities have led to the establishment of two further NGOs, Civil Coordination Against Disasters and the Association for Development of Social and Cultural Life, which work specifically on disaster relief.

Currently, most of the members of the Citizen Initiative are involved with the Peace Initiative.

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Editor's Preface

In February 1997, catalyzed by a public scandal and mobilized by a sophisticated publicity campaign, 30 million Turkish citizens joined in a protest against endemic corruption among Turkish politicians, businesses, organized crime and the media. Their actions forced judicial investigations, and among the Turkish citizenry, contributed to a long-term groundswell of active concern about corruption. The image of 30 million citizens turning their lights on and off, banging pots and pans, and marching in the streets was a clarion call to Turkey, signaling that the traditional apathy, hopelessness and fear in the face of corruption could no longer be taken for granted. This notebook will describe the Citizen Initiative in Turkey and its tactic of creating a single mass expression of protest based on a simple activity that citizens could carry out in the safety of their own homes: turning the lights out. Using high-quality media-savvy publicity techniques, the Citizen Initiative catalyzed an unprecedented outbreak of public expression on a previously taboo subject.

Confronting corruption is not traditionally viewed as a human rights activity. But the links are inescapable. Corrupt officials often implement human rights abuses. Their corruption sabotages the democratic systems of accountability so necessary for the monitoring and protection of human rights. Conversely, policies of repression serve to deliberately prevent the kind of democratic mobilization, participation and transparency that would allow civil society to take on corruption and confront the entrenched power of those it enriches. Corruption and human rights abuse are mutually self-sustaining.

Turkey is a secular nation with a tradition of democracy. But it also has a tradition of human rights abuse. It is a large country, located at the crossroads of both legal and

illegal commerce between the Western and Eastern worlds, and corruption is an entrenched pillar of a system that makes billions of dollars for "deep state"¹ personages who influence both the economy and the politics of the country. The influence of corruption extends throughout society through local patronage systems undeterred by any investigative reporting from a mass media industry, which is itself complicit in the corruption. As a result, the corruption issue has historically sparked only apathy and hopelessness in Turkish civil society. The organizers of this effort did not know if 500 people or 500,000 would join them. But they were joined by 30 million! What happened?

One Minute of Darkness for Constant Light was a protest organized by a spontaneously formed Citizen Initiative for Constant Light. It launched a "call from citizen to citizen," setting off an enthusiastic chain of events that no one ever could have predicted. It began on the night of February 1, 1997, when citizens throughout Turkey began turning off their lights off at 9 pm every night until the members of the crime syndicate – politicians, police, the mob – in the parliament were brought to justice. Although the huge problem of corruption in Turkey remains, these events opened a door for criticism, questioning and even legal action against some of those involved. By 2001, Turkey had an interior minister launching a series of high-profile operations as part of a crusade against corruption. In 2002, the populace threw out the majority of the parliament in a surprising election that many believe was in part retaliation against corruption.

– Liam Mahony, notebook series editor

¹ "Deep state" is used in Turkish society to describe those in the establishment who use state power and authority illegally to maintain corruption and prevent reforms toward democratization, the rule of law, transparency and accountability of the administration.

Introduction: Two Events

A “Crash Course” For Democracy Begins!

November 3, 1996. Western Turkey. After sunset, on an intercity highway near a roadside town called Susurluk. A dark green Mercedes is speeding from an Aegean resort town towards Istanbul. Inside are four people with a bag full of dollars, a trunk full of arms, ammunition and silencers, and pockets full of cocaine. They are coming home from a “business” trip.

At the same time at a roadside gas station near Susurluk. A truck has just filled up its tank and heads off on a long journey home. It slowly eases its way onto the main road. The Mercedes arrives full-speed just as the body of the turning truck covers the road. Crash! For Turkey a “crash course” in democracy begins.

Inside the Mercedes:

The driver: Huseyin Kocada. A police chief and police college director. Dead.

The owner of the car: Sedat Bucak. A member of the parliament and of one of the biggest landowning families in southeast Turkey. Wounded.

The criminal: Mehmet Özbay (aka Abdullah Çatlı). Extreme rightwing hit man, drug smuggler, blackmailer, covert operative for Turkish gladio², prison escapee, most wanted by Swiss police, Interpol and Turkish courts of law. Dead.

The mistress: Gonca Us. Dead

Inside the truck:

Driver: Hasan Gökçe. The citizen. Slightly wounded, the driver of the truck is taken into custody, and is the first to be taken into a court of law!

² The Turkish gladio refers to paramilitary entities – anti-guerrilla or anti-terror squads – which are secret, and notorious for their complicity with the mafia.

In short, the corrupted state with its cohorts, indulging in an orgy in a luxury car, hit an old truck driven by a citizen!

The day after the news broke, student protests erupted throughout the country only to be brutally crushed by the police. Ironically, on the same day a group of students was on trial for breaking the “Demonstrations Law” by unfurling a banner in parliament proclaiming that no one should be allowed to interfere with their right to an education. They were sentenced to 15 months in prison! The police, the courts and parliament – three vital sections of the corrupted state – were united in their response to any questioning of the status quo.

Three Months Later: The Hopeful Noise of 30 Million Citizens ...

On February 1, 1997, at precisely 9 p.m., the lights started to go out in Istanbul and other Turkish cities. Household after household, in a perfectly synchronized mass action, turned off their lights for one full minute. On February 2, the same thing again, only more houses. On February 3, again. By February 15, an estimated 30 million Turkish households throughout the country were participating in the biggest public protest against corruption in Turkish history.

Turning off the lights for one minute was all the organizers had suggested anyone do. But it wasn't enough for the citizens. As the action's momentum grew, people needed more. They spontaneously went beyond the suggested one minute. They began flicking their lights on and off repeatedly, turning the cities of Turkey into a light show. Then people began opening their windows, blowing whistles, banging pots and pans. The light show became an audio-visual extravaganza.

Finally, people began pouring out into the streets. Cars on the highways stopped and began blowing their horns. Even the most affluent neighborhoods in Turkey were turned into spontaneous street carnivals.

The unspoken frustration of all of Turkey, hidden for so many years behind fear and apathy, was now out in the open and on the streets!

Background

The Corrupt Crime Syndicate

“Because of the war in the southeast of Turkey, there was major drug-trafficking going on. The gladio and the mafia joined forces and took control of this traffic. In the meantime many extrajudicial executions took place. Some of them were political and others were tied up with the mafia. These entities expanded with the huge profits from drugs and spread throughout the state. Everybody suffered from this in Turkey: the working class, the financial sector, and the ordinary people. Because this gladio-mafia combination affected all walks of life. Obviously, after this accident everything came to light.”

Ergin Cinmen, lawyer

The country’s mass media was also notoriously complicit in the problem. The mafia had recently been acquiring control over one of the major broadcasting corporations through some of its business links and by the manipulation of legislation. The press and the National Broadcasters Association were trying to find ways to regain their damaged credibility and straighten up their public image.

In fact, just before the crash, the National Broadcasters Association had hired an advertising agency to design a public image campaign for the industry. Ersin Salman, who became a key player in the Citizen Initiative, headed up this campaign. The crash provided the perfect catalyst for the campaign, and for the mobilization of Turkish citizens against corruption. It may not have signified any deeper long-term commitment in the media industry to combat corruption, but the campaign was an ideal opportunity to build a temporary marriage of convenience between the immediate interests of the media industry

and the heartfelt commitments of a growing citizens movement against corruption. The media maintained sufficient independence from the government and the mafia to accept a campaign that would be highly critical of both.

After the Crash: A Plan Is Conceived

The Susurluk crash created a huge scandal. Not only was one parliamentary leader in the Mercedes, but the signature of Mehmet Agar, the minister of internal affairs, was found on the fake identity papers of the criminal Abdullah Çatlı. Agar had signed these papers when he was the chief of police. He resigned his cabinet post a week after the crash, but remained in parliament. The public wanted more serious action taken against both Agar and Bucak, the parliament member who had survived the crash. These two powerful men clearly had close ties to the crime syndicate. Both were of the fundamentalist Right Path party, the government’s coalition partner.

Within a month a few progressive lawyers met to talk about it and quickly realized that this scandal offered the potential to raise a public outcry and push for some real change. They began meeting to discuss a strategy. They saw that to take advantage of such a high-profile public event they would need a high-profile public campaign. And as with any scandal, the public would soon lose interest, so they needed to move fast. They realized they would need assistance from experts in publicity and mass media. Through personal connections, they quickly expanded their strategy sessions to include communications experts – including Ersin Salman – as well as political activists and intellectuals. These informal discussions became the basis for establishing the Citizen Initiative for Constant Light. Quickly, but not without serious debates and discussions, they hashed out a campaign strategy.

The Strategic Objectives

“Our demands were clear. To prosecute those who had established the criminal organizations, to protect the judiciary officials [who would be trying the case] from pressure, to reveal the dubious relations hiding within the state. And our last demand was, while doing this, not to undermine democracy.”
– **Mebuse Tekay, lawyer**

The campaign’s short-term goal was to force the parliament to remove immunities from the members of the parliament who were accused of being part of the nationwide corruption syndicate, and bring them to trial.

The action principles had to confront the unconscious fears of the population:

1. To move the majority of the population, the objective needed to be legitimate and legal.
2. The action itself also had to be legitimate and legal.
3. The action had to be something simple, like making a phone call, or standing still on a sidewalk.
4. The action needed to be risk-free. It should not cause people unnecessary fear or worry.

They also needed to confront hopelessness and apathy:

5. The target had to be very specific and concrete. The actual criterion for success of the action should be its ability to mobilize the society in a nationwide feeling of “togetherness.”
6. Finally, the action needed to have the humor and cheerfulness of a sincere public celebration.

The group decided on a strategy of nonpolitical alliances. The leadership group would remain anonymous, maintaining an unbiased and leaderless image to move the masses. Members of this group wanted an image of credibility untainted by any perception of ideological links that might turn away citizens with other beliefs. The whole idea was that this was everyone’s concern.

“The Susurluk accident deeply affected all of us. Everyone was thinking about what they could do... how to react. First we talked to our friends, then to the several civil rights organizations and professional associations. We saw that everybody shared the same emotion. The consensus was to find something to motivate society.”
– **Mebuse Tekay, lawyer**

The Plan

There were three main components to the plan: the message, the type of action and the mobilization process.

The Message: “Nothing will be the same after Susurluk!”

Ersin Salman’s ad agency designed a creative message campaign to meet the needs of the National Broadcasters Association, but also in the spirit of the Citizen Initiative:

*“We know everything!
I’ve heard – I have a radio
I’ve seen – I have a television
I’ve read – I have a newspaper
Nothing will be the same after the crash!
Nothing will be the same after the truck!
Nothing will be the same after SUSURLUK!”*

For the Citizen Initiative, this message expressed an unequivocal break with history. On the one hand it was a threat to the powers-that-be that there would be no more secrets and that this time they would not get away with it. But “Nothing will be the same” also implied that public action would no longer be ineffectual or ignored. The implicit mobilizing message behind the message was that this time we can make a difference.

Salman convinced his clients to relate their campaign to the Susurluk event, and this gave important start-up momentum to the Citizen Initiative, which could then count on media support. Once the mobilizing action was conceived, numerous other creative professionals became involved in creating messages and images to promote the campaign, including advertising professionals, filmmakers, graphic designers, illustrators, merchandising experts, journalists and experienced political activists.

The Proposed Action

The idea of switching off the lights came from the teenage daughter of one of the lawyers. One Minute of Darkness for Constant Light immediately appealed to the organizers. It seemed a naïve but satisfying solution. The “light” activity could be practiced in the confines of a home, the core of Turkish family life. Participants could remain anonymous, yet everyone’s participation would be visible. The anonymity of the action became part of the publicity message.

“On February 1, 1997, we will begin to turn off our lights at 9 p.m. every night, until the members of the crime syndicate and its connections in the state are brought to court!”
– an anonymous aunt

We felt the campaign idea should appear to come not from an intellectual or an elite group, but from a street person, a kid, an aunt on a pension, etc. The last one had a good ring to it: the call to action would come from an Anonymous Aunt!



Faxes and press releases were designed for mass distribution to the citizenry. All the press releases were signed: “Listen to the voice of the silent majority!”

The Mobilization: Media Alliances, NGO Alliances, Unions: The Chain of Faxes

Spreading the word required media support and an alliance of grassroots organizations that would alert their members. Starting four weeks before "S-day" (Susurluk day, Feb. 1), the Citizen Initiative studied articles by nearly 60 newspaper and magazine columnists, seeking out allies in the press and studying the media's own anti-corruption language and messages. They sent personalized letters to the columnists

calling them to action in the same language and terminology the columnists themselves had used to explain the results of the Susurluk crash. Columnists joined in the effort, writing about state corruption, the need for a huge public participation and the importance of the consequences of the Susurluk crash. Columnists play an important role in the media's relationship to the public because they can be opinionated and use persuasive arguments. Some even tried to be heroic – to be the "poets" of this new popular upheaval. Such persuasive columns helped build momentum.

Sürekli aydınlık için 1 dakika karanlık! 1 Minute of Darkness for Constant Light!

Suç örgütlerini kuranların ve onlara görev verenlerin, mutlaka yargı önüne çıkarılması konusundaki kararlı isteğimi göstermek;

To show my determination to bring to justice the ones who assembled crime organizations and the ones who hired their services;

olayı soruşturan kişi ve mercilere destek vermek;

to support the persons and authorities who investigate the events in questions;

demokratik, çağdaş, şeffaf hukuk devleti özlemimi duyurmak için,

to make my yearning for a democratic, contemporary and transparent state of law be heard;

1 Subat 1997 Cumartesi gününden başlayarak,

Starting Saturday, February 1, 1997;

her gün saat 21.00'de ışığımı **BİR DAKİKA** süreyle karartıyorum.

at 9:00 pm everyday I'll turn my lights off for ONE MINUTE.

Ve bu ülkede yaşayan herkesi, bir ay süreyle, her gün saat 21.00'de ışıklarını karartmaya çağırıyorum And.,

And I call everyone who live in this country for a one minute black out everyday at 9:00 pm for one month!

Bu çağrı, **YURTTAŞTAN YURTTAŞA** yapılmıştır.

This is a call from CITIZEN TO CITIZEN

Lütfen Yaygınlaştırın

Please spread!

Adı-Soyadı
Name-Surname

Mesleği
Profession

İmzası
Signature

**CITIZEN'S INITIATIVE
For CONSTANT LIGHT**

Address, phone and fax numbers...

The “call to action” fax was circulated rapidly to as many in the population as possible. To ensure that the message did not appear to have any ideological bias, the organizers first approached the most non-political group they could think of: the Istanbul Coordination of Chambers of Professions, who immediately agreed to cooperate. The organizers also approached the member chambers of various professions, in order to involve them each in the effort: the Bar Association, and the chambers of dentists, electrical engineers, civil engineers and pharmacists. Unions and NGOs were also a key means of distributing the message. Each group distributed a one-page fax to their members and asked them to distribute it to their neighbors, friends and relatives, creating a chain reaction. The Internet had yet to take hold in Turkey, so faxes were the crucial communication mechanism.

Once this process of fax distribution got underway, it took on a life of its own, through an ever-increasing circle of organizations and networks. A spontaneous chain of communication took advantage of all the many formal and informal connections among different sectors of the population.

The Media Bandwagon

The Citizen Initiative closely paralleled the media’s own call for a cleansing of the corrupt system, and in a sense this obliged the media to support the campaign. In the final two weeks leading up to 5-day, and during the five weeks of the action, there were exuberant articles, special news coverage and inserts in other TV programs about the time of the action. Radio interviews appeared back to back. All 14 major broadcasters joined in. Some even put a small reminder in the corner of the screen during prime-time news hours.

Financing a Mass Campaign

A huge effort like this certainly involves substantial costs, but the financing was completely decentralized and voluntary. Salman’s ad agency and their campaign for a cleaner media were formally independent of the Citizen Initiative, paid for by the association of broadcasters. The initiative also had its own messages. Skilled professionals designed and produced publicity materials as a

voluntary contribution to the effort. For courier services, posters and other mass printed materials, Citizen Initiative used voluntary institutions or commercial companies willing to pay their share for “the cause.” Had it been centralized and billed, this combined commercial product would probably have cost \$8-\$9 million U.S. dollars! In addition, dozens – perhaps hundreds – of organizations absorbed the cost of sending their own faxes.

“The call to action was very straightforward, addressed from citizen to citizen. The first step was to send a fax to everybody. Within a week we received 10,000 responses. This showed us that our call to action would have major support. On January 15, we held a press conference. It was quite an interesting press conference because its host was not an organization, but a group of people with no political affiliation. But the real host of the press conference was the 10,000 signatures, which were hung in the conference hall. We took a visual approach, for example we staged a pantomime of the accident. We had no official spokesperson; various people fielded the journalist’s questions. So it was the first press conference held by 10,000 individuals. This in itself was very effective.”

– Yüksel Selek, Citizen Initiative
general secretary

The Action: Feb. 1 – March 9: What Actually Happened

“When we initiated this protest we were worried about participation. But we all believed it would create a sensation. Only 500 could have taken part. That would still have indicated a moral stance. But we never imagined the number of people who actually did participate. ... For the first time groups that had never joined forces before in Turkey found themselves participating side by side. From the business community to slum dwellers.”

– **Mebuse Tekay, lawyer**

“The success of the protest stemmed from its simplicity; people stayed at home and joined the action. We never thought that people would take to the streets, but they did with great joy and enthusiasm.”

– **Yüksel Selek**

The action built up gradually, starting with people switching their lights off as planned. More did so each night. But people quickly became bored with mere darkness, and some began blinking their lights on and off. Then, in a development that shows the importance of

synergy between mass action and the media, the television news showed images of blinking lights. The next night people all over Turkey were blinking their lights.

The first week of lights proved to everyone that there was massive citizen support for the campaign. Such mass support changed people’s perceptions of the danger and the hopelessness they had always associated with confronting corruption. By the second week people began coming out of their houses and moving the protest to the streets. At this point improvisation was the order of the day with every neighborhood independently making decisions about street actions.

Protesters from Turkey’s 36 cities and 81 townships communicated with the Citizen Initiative for Light via telephone and fax. Many regions established their own initiatives.

The intensity of the public actions peaked in mid- to late February, and then began to diminish. The organizers felt that it would be better for the action to end while actions were still at a high level rather than waiting for them to fizzle out slowly. There was also some concern that the protest was being hijacked for political anti-government purposes. So they called for an end to the actions on March 9.

The Political Reaction and Fallout

During the second week of the One Minute of Darkness actions, various government spokespersons, and even Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan himself, began to criticize the street actions. By February 15, new reports (or leaked reports) from different official intelligence organizations, the police, the military and the national intelligence agency started to appear in the media further exacerbating the scandal. The accused political parties felt they needed to take a stand. The prime minister made public statements attempting to belittle what was going on in the streets, and referred disdainfully to “Our

famous street dance, cannibal’s dance.” Kazan, minister of justice, said “Turning off lights in times like this is treachery!” He went on to accuse those in the streets of participating in sexual orgies.³ The leader of the coalition partner Right Path party, Tansu Çiller, questioned the patriotism of those who took part.

³ “They play ‘Snuff the candle!’” said Kazan. This was a very politically incorrect statement, feeding on the false and derogatory myth that the Alevi’s (a very liberal and Turkish interpretation of Islam and the people who belong to this sect, nearly 25 percent of the Turkish population) have orgies at night on special occasions and they “snuff the candles” and choose whatever partner they find in the dark.

The action was so massive that despite the organizers' goal of keeping it non-ideological, it couldn't help but play into national political struggles. The political world inferred that the protests were pointing a finger at the government, and more particularly at members of the ruling government's coalition. The Right Path party leader was under even more pressure to defend the accused MPs, in her party, and she herself was suspected of crime syndicate links. Since the government was led by the Fundamentalist Refah party, the protests opened the door for critics of this party, including those in the military, to use the opportunity to bring it down. There was a substantial risk that the protests would be hijacked into inter-party disputes over who held the reins of national power. Thus some of the banners seen in the streets said things like "Çiller should be put on trial," or "Refah Party should be banned."

"We discussed this derailing of the protest. Some of us said that we should speak out. But most of our friends felt that we were just initiators, it wasn't our mission to tell the protesters what they should or shouldn't do. And frankly, many among us didn't support Refah Party and were not so distressed by the situation the government found itself in."

– Mebuse Tekay

On February 28, the National Security Council (with influential army officers involved) forced

the government to resign. This was referred to as a "post-modern coup-d'etat." They did not use force but "persuasion." It was bloodless and quick. Erbakan remained as prime minister until the new government was approved by the parliament in September – six months later.

It was certainly not the Citizen Initiative's goal to bring down the Refah government. On the contrary, the idea was to make the government work against corruption. In the long run, without a new generation of politicians in the parliament, the existing inertia will always help maintain the links between politicians, state institutions and the mafia. The Citizen Initiative's goals required a working government, not parliament members idly waiting for a new government to form. The fall of the Erbakan-led coalition caused a long delay in necessary actions by the courts.

"Even if we had come out and said it wasn't our aim to undermine the Refahyol government, but to clean up the dubious relationships between the state and the gangs, this wouldn't have prevented the fall of the government ... If we had spoken out against what happened it would have been better. At least the generals couldn't look us in the eye and say that their postmodern coup d'etat had the support of the citizen."

– Mebuse Tekay

Follow-up Actions

The key demand of the initiative had been the removal of parliamentary immunity. The Susurluk crash had clearly implicated two highly influential members of parliament, but their immunity prevented their interrogation or official accountability. To remove these immunities, the high court needed to issue a roll of inquiries, which it did. In March, it became obvious that Prime Minister Erbakan was using legal loopholes to block this roll of inquiries for the accused members of the parliament, preventing it from reaching the general assembly of the parliament for a vote.

In response, Citizen Initiative mobilized again between April 6 and April 23, 1997. Once again, thousands of faxes traveled and lights blinked across the country. This time the slogan was "I revolt! I insist!" A humorous ad campaign popularized a new toy developed just for the campaign – the "Susurluk Bigger democracy machine" (see graphic). On April 17, different groups gathered in post offices all over the country and sent "stolen" copies of the high court inquiries by registered mail to all parliament members.

When the new government finally received a vote of confidence, the One Minute of Darkness for Constant Light campaign again sprang into action. A new fax campaign circulated the phrase "Government wheels won't turn unless the gladio filth is gone!" Although the light-switching response was not as widespread as in February, this time street actions were initiated by various organizations. A new message was circulated through the media, "What have you done for Susurluk today?" The action this time was committed to continuing until the immunities were lifted. At a press conference on November 3, the Citizen Initiative presented the Susurluk Citizen Report, including policy suggestions to the government about how to resolve the

Susurluk case. The immunities of MPs Agar and Bucak were lifted on December 9, and the One

"SUSURLUK BUGGER"

(every night at exactly 9:00 pm)

Having a problem about not enough democracy?

Stomach pains about national events?

Nothing gives you relief but

"1 min. Darkness for Continuous Light?"

Here's your prescription:

Everynight at 9:00pm just after or before dinner use:

An incredibly entertaining, multi purpose Democracy Machine:

"SUSURLUK BUGGER"

This unique little device has everything a troubled citizen like you need:

Shake it to hear it sound:
Shakka-Shukka!

Blow it to send the witches away:

Aieeeeeeee!

Show it to make yourself better understood: A citizen beating his/her head! (as seen in this Ad)



Demokratikleşme konusunda derdiniz mi var? Ülke'deki olaylar karşısında hazım zorluğu mu çekiyorsunuz? "Sürekli Aydınlık İçin 1 Dakika Karanlık"tan başka hiçbir şey iç sıkıntınızı gideremiyor mu?

Size, her gece saat tam 9'da, akşam yemeklerinden hemen önce ya da hemen sonra kullanabileceğiniz, olağanüstü eğlenceli ve çok amaçlı bir demokrasi makinesi öneriyoruz: "Susurluk Zırlıtısı".

Bu şahane alet, salladığınız zaman "şakada şukada" ses çıkarma özelliğine sahip olduğu gibi, aynı zamanda gövdesine eklenmiş bir de düdük barındırmaktadır.

Ayrıca -şekilde görüldüğü gibi- başını döven yurttaş biçiminde olup, günün anlam ve önemine de uygun düşmektedir.

İsteme Adresi:
Uzunçarşı Cad. 251 Eminönü-İstanbul
Tel: (0-212) 511 11 33 - 522 22 51

Minute of Darkness for Constant Light action was ended.

But the work wasn't over. The two MPs were never convicted or sentenced, and were reelected to parliament in the next election. In 1998 a signature campaign was launched,

entitled "I resign from being a slave. Now I'm a citizen!" The approach now was broader than a single event, aiming to change the relationship between Turkish citizens and their government. In May, Citizen Initiative organized a series of roundtable meetings

gathering intellectuals from across the country, laying the groundwork for a new "Civic Constitution Initiative." This led to a series of letter-writing campaigns and a reform proposal.

Longer-term Results

The Impact on Corruption in Turkey

"This protest set a precedent. Without this protest it would have been impossible to bring the Susurluk suspects to trial. The sensitivity that fueled this protest initiated the trial and brought to light all the various activities of the gang. The subsequent prime minister felt obliged to follow up on the case and activated a special investigative committee. This committee prepared a report unprecedented in its scope. It listed each and every victim murdered by the crime syndicate. A parliamentary investigative committee was formed that also substantiated all the syndicate's activities. The tip of the iceberg went to trial. Most unexpectedly, verdicts were even handed out ... All of these events are unprecedented in Turkey. And it all began with this Citizen Initiative for Constant Light."
– Ergin Cinmen

Over time, there was a great deal of political and legal fallout from this event. There were several trials – of businessmen, police, military personnel and mafia leaders. But the two key members of parliament targeted by the campaign were never tried. Mehmet Agar managed to avoid the trials by resigning from his party. As an independent he was later elected by his hometown, where he remains the most powerful political figure.

It is possible that the One Minute of Darkness for Constant Light campaign opened the door for later battles against corruption. In 2001, Interior Minister Sadettin Tantan launched an outspoken campaign against corruption. Some of his investigations received significant media and public attention. In cooperation with the Banking Regulation and Supervision Agency

(BRSA), his high-profile investigations, dubbed "Operation Hurricane," "Operation Whale," and "Operation Parachute," uncovered embezzlement on a massive scale, and led to the arrest of several prominent executives. But only private sector personalities were detained, while bureaucrats and elected officials – two crucial legs of the quadrangle of Turkish corruption – have yet to face charges. And in any case, Tantan's tenure did not last long.

Six years after Susurluk-day, in November 2002, elections created a new era in the Turkish political system. As this notebook goes to press, 70 percent of the members of the Turkish parliament are serving for the first time, and all party leaders of the last decades are out of the parliament. One analysis of this change is that voters punished the politicians for their failure to deal with state corruption, and punished the military by electing a party from the mild and democratic side of Islamist tradition. The new governing AK PARTY (White Party) has proclaimed three priorities: Radically diminish the immunity of parliament members; create a new constitution, starting from the basic human rights issues that must be addressed by candidate countries of the European Union; and make the new anti-monopoly media laws work. Meanwhile, Mehmet Agar is still in parliament, and as long as he is there, the Susurluk-day issue continues. But in a new Turkey now.

The Citizen Initiative After 1997

On a tactical level, the experience of the Citizen Initiative helped inform national campaigns on other issues. On August 17, 1999, a terrible earthquake struck Turkey. Due in part to its deep corruption, the government was incapable of mounting an efficient response to meet the needs of victims. Social networking by citizens thus became their lifesaver. Citizen Initiative organizers worked with the Human

Settlements Association to bring together 26 organizations to form the Civic Coordination Center for the Earthquake. Hundreds of NGOs and individuals formed rescue groups in each city in Turkey. The process was improvisational, involving mass media tactics to recruit the citizenry for the rescue effort. The tactical experience we had gained from the Citizen Initiative was put to good use. The Citizen Initiative remains a key player in the Civic Coordination Center, and has used its tactical expertise to mount a series of ongoing reconstruction and reparation campaigns for victims of the disaster.

2003: Resisting War Against Iraq

In February 2003 a new One Minute of Darkness for Constant Light campaign was initiated, this time aimed at demonstrating public opposition to an impending war threatened by the United States against Iraq, on Turkey's southern border. A coalition of organizations in Turkey concerned about stopping the war came together for a tactical mobilization based explicitly on the success of the 1997 action. This time, in addition to calling on all Turkish citizens to turn off their lights to show opposition to the war, coalition members

also circulated the message internationally to NGOs and peoples' movements all over the world, calling on them to repeat the action globally.

On February 15, 2003, when mass rallies against war were occurring all over the world, the lights were going out in Turkey. The majority of the population was opposed to the war, and the "lights out" tactic was a signal that both the public and the government understood. Even the new president of the parliament, Bulent Arinc, announced publicly that he would be turning out his lights at 8 p.m.

On March 1, 2003, the Turkish Parliament surprised the world by voting by a slim majority to refuse to allow U.S. troops to use southern Turkey as a base for launching a war against Iraq. Despite the fact that the ruling party leaders, the army and big business were clearly in support of collaboration with the U.S. military in the war, 94 percent of the Turkish population was opposed. The parliament, for the first time in the last 30 years, voted with the people disregarding the pressure of their parties.

Transplanting the Tactic: Analytical Questions

Breaking Popular Silence

One Minute of Darkness for Constant Light brilliantly took advantage of a simple, no risk tactic – getting mass numbers of people to turn their lights off and on – to tap into a deeply shared frustration under the surface of Turkish society. The Susurluk-day protests occurred not because there was a car crash, but because the Turkish people were fed up with corruption and ready to react. If they had not been ready, the crash would not have mattered. But their readiness was only partial, and they needed a safe opening. They needed the support of their fellow citizens. The genius of the Susurluk-day event was that it found a way for masses of people to simultaneously voice their resistance and express publicly what they felt about a frightening and oppressive problem.

It isn't surprising, then, that organizers could not predict the reactions. In the 1980s movement for democracy in Chile, organizers used a similar tactic to encourage people to safely express their desire for democracy and their frustration with the military rule of General Augusto Pinochet. On May 11, 1983, the quiet night air of Santiago was taken over by the din of millions of citizens banging pots and pans together on their windowsills, and by the blaring of car horns. Like the One Minute of Darkness, the event vividly captured the public's frustration. There could be no denying the will of the people. Pinochet sent security forces out to violently stop the politically deafening noise, arresting 600 people. The Chilean transition to democracy would still take

most of a decade, but the silence was broken, and the noise was unstoppable.⁴

This is a tactic that brings people together. It will work if there is compelling concern shared by substantial numbers of people in the society, as was the case in Turkey. Its force is in masses, and it therefore needs to be used in the context of an issue that will mobilize the masses to act

Professional PR: Mass Message Approach

“The lesson that can be drawn is that this kind of protest can be organized to meet the heartfelt needs of society. Yes, the mechanism of the action is simple. But to achieve this level of participation the matter has to be of vital importance to the people. Without publicity the most just cause can’t be heard. Media publicity is an absolute necessity.”

– Ersin Salman

The Citizen Initiative was a striking example of how a political mobilization can use sophisticated publicity expertise. Of course the fact that the broadcaster association’s image campaign coincided so neatly with the Susurluk crash is not a circumstance anyone can count on repeating. Even so, the lawyers who first started discussing a strategy recognized that the kind of impact they wanted could only be achieved with professional communications support, and through a good relationship with the media. Any mass-message campaign can learn from this, and seek out such alliances.

The necessary alliance and the potential mass success, though, also depend on the message itself. The Citizen Initiative would have had much greater difficulty obtaining media support if the message had appeared too ideological, too impossible or too complicated. The message and the demand also needed to be relatively short-term, since the media could

not be expected to maintain its focus on this campaign indefinitely.

Thus there were necessary tradeoffs in this alliance. The campaign demands were very small: an investigation of a few individuals in parliament. The strength of this limitation was that it was achievable. But once achieved, the momentum was gone. The Citizen Initiative continued after the campaign was over, but the mass mobilization did not. Confronting corruption would remain a complex problem that required a long-term commitment. Simplistic messages and short-term goals could rouse public and media interest, but something more would be needed to sustain it. The organizers accepted at the outset that this would be a short-term initiative, aiming for maximum popular participation in a highly visible event.

The Apolitical, Anonymous Approach

Instigators of the Citizen Initiative campaign made two strategic choices to achieve an image of unbiased credibility. They tried to avoid allying too closely with any overly politicized groups, instead focusing on a large variety of apparently neutral social groupings and thus making the effort less vulnerable to charges of political manipulation. They also maintained their own anonymity, making the campaign less vulnerable to accusations of being manipulated by a small group’s personal ambitions and more accessible to a larger number of groups and people, who could not easily dismiss the campaign based on prejudices about its organizers.

These choices had drawbacks as well. The organizers did ask a variety of institutions to spread the word about the action to their mailing lists or membership, but did not encourage them to think they could have any influence over the process. The non-political and non-organizational nature of the effort probably made it more difficult to organize any sustained subsequent long-term campaign on the issue because the larger politicized institutions, like political parties or unions, did not have any ownership of the process, and therefore had less motivation to sustain it as public interest waned. Avoiding allegedly “ideological” allies might result in cutting out the kind of institutional support that could sustain a longer-term effort.

⁴ For more detail on this and other nonviolent tactics in the Chilean struggle for democracy, see *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict*, by Peter Ackerman and Jack Du Vall, St. Martins Press, New York, 2000, pp. 279-302.

The anonymity choice reflected to some extent the “leaderless” reality of the spontaneous group that had formed. Its decision making process was run by a loose body of people, rather than any one leader. The membership and size of the group changed over time, and its decisions were largely limited to creative suggestions. This decentralization might be both strength and a weakness. But what the publicity experts did with it in the short-run – crediting the whole campaign idea to an “anonymous aunt” – was apparently effective in this case. It was not only a catchy marketing move, it may have had the further advantage of protecting the security of the organizers in the event of any more serious retaliation against the campaign.

Nevertheless, there are trade-offs around this choice as well, and it would probably work only for a short-term campaign. Over the longer-term, any campaign against corruption will need to defend its own credibility by showing the same transparency it demands of the state. A long-term anonymous campaign would likely give rise to contagious suspicions that would damage the public effectiveness of the message. But in the short run, as this event proved, it did not have that effect.

The Catalytic Event: Is It Necessary? How Do You Know When You Have It?

The One Minute of Darkness campaign might appear far too dependent on an uncontrollable and unforeseeable event – the scandalous crash that created the opening in the media’s and the public’s interest. Certainly the February 1997 protests would not have happened without the November 1996 car crash.

Nevertheless, this should not deter anyone who otherwise sees a potential use for this tactic in their own situation: In a corrupt system there are always scandalous events occurring, and the extent to which they become national media events depends a great deal on what we make of them. Events occur, but scandals are built and manipulated in either a chaotic or an organized fashion.

The success of the Citizen Initiative suggests that it might be worth engaging in an ongoing analysis of the potential of a variety of events to move public opinion on critical social issues—a sort of “scandal watch.” This could involve a group of analysts with political and

communications savvy who can accurately estimate the potential public impact of events as they happen, and help organizations build messages using these events to mobilize effective mass campaigns.

The Single Event and the Long-term Campaign Strategy

A single “big-splash” event can be the launching point for a long-term institution-based strategy for resolving a complex social problem like corruption. There is no inherent contradiction between the big event and the slower and quieter long-term effort. Nevertheless, as some of the discussions above suggest, there may be tradeoffs involved in some of the choices made around a massive single event, choices which don’t necessarily favor the possibility of a sustainable campaign. The converse is also true: choices favoring a long-term complex campaign can make mass mobilization more difficult.

A single political goal, for instance, can be anti-climactic once you achieve it. Does winning a small and specific goal give you momentum to keep going, or do people go home feeling like it is finished? If you don’t achieve the specific goal fast enough, can you maintain public interest in the effort? The answer may depend on whether you also create an understanding among the public of the need for a longer-term and complex strategy. Strategically, it is one thing to say, “Our objective is to remove the immunities of two parliament members.” It is somewhat different to say, “Our first step will be to remove the immunities of these two parliament members.”

On the other hand, if you are starting with no public momentum at all, it is certainly not good marketing to try to convince the public, much less the media, to buy in to a complicated long-term strategy. Employing shorter-term tactics that people and the media can feel are reachable may build public momentum in small increments. The more detailed the strategic steps you plan, the more people may start to question this goal or that goal, or feel hopeless that the whole thing will never work.

Also, a mass campaign often involves a loosely knit coalition of partners. Such coalitions involve many different kinds of people with

many different agendas. They have the strength of potentially being able to move huge numbers of people, and of demonstrating an undeniably broad public interest in an issue. But it can be difficult or impossible to unite such a coalition around anything other than the simplest lowest-common-denominator goals and messages. Likewise, these coalitions tend to be difficult to hold together for long periods of time, because the energy of each coalition partner is also focused on its own organizational objectives and strategies. A short-term goal may thus be more achievable while the unity of coalition energy is maintained.

The One Minute of Darkness campaign was a short-term tactic, based on the hope that the

public and the organizations involved would spontaneously take the energy it created and do something with it. As a result, it did not have a "stage two" plan in place to take immediate advantage of the momentum that built up in February 1997.

Any campaigns, be they short- or long-term, that address pressing social problems affecting large portions of the population can benefit from the use of techniques that make messages accessible to the majority of the population through the mass media, and the momentum of your efforts can be aided by the empowerment people will feel from having participated in such mass events .

Conclusion

No problem that affects so many people, as corruption does, can remain forever absent from the public agenda. Eventually the light will have to shine on it. People will overcome their fears and apathy and try to do something about it. Political movements to solve big problems don't have to always be the work of a small minority of hard-core activists. The citizenry does not have to be left out, and this campaign shows that citizens don't necessarily want to be silent. What activists can provide, and what communications experts can help to create, are strategies, tactics and messages that encourage people on a massive scale to take steps together to overcome their hopelessness and fear. Not every struggle, and not every moment, requires a mass-appeal citizen action. But in the right situation, such actions open new doors for activism and broader social change.

The activists who struggle year-in and year-out on unpopular issues that confront established power can sometimes lose faith in the public, and lose hope that people can ever be mobilized on a mass scale. As a result they sometimes limit the scope of their strategies and tactics to small groups. Mass mobilization seems impossible, so it is not attempted. Opportunities are missed. Events like the Susurluk protests show what can happen if we open our horizons to bigger possibilities.

The mainstream media is often corrupt, often allied with elites and often avoids its responsibility to prod people's social conscience. But there are also allies within the media and the communication industry who

can play key roles in citizen activism. There are political moments when media institutions can benefit from engaging in social activism. Activists need to develop an understanding of what the media can offer to their movements, and of how to take advantage of it. The Susurluk organizers depended on the media, and effectively took advantage of every opportunity to feed in to the media's need to appear 'clean' in the face of corruption. The Citizen Initiative used professional communication techniques to create messages for mass appeal, and it made a big difference. They created catchy slogans, and humorous visual images. They gave people actions they could all feel safe participating in, and goals that appeared achievable. Their success was an inspiration, but it was not an accident. We can all learn from it.

An Open Letter of Appreciation For Thomas Edison

Dear Thomas, when you invented the first electric bulb, you would not guess that this little device will help the progress of democracy in a country, and besides being a device for illumination it may give a light of hope for the citizens of this country...



Notes

Notes

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