

# The Electoral Success of the AKP: Cause for Hope and Despair

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## ABSTRACT

*The 2011 elections marked the emergence of the AKP as a political brand that is likely to win all the elections in the foreseeable future. The party's overwhelming popularity is linked to its image as the most reliable and trustworthy political party today. The ambitious democratization promises of the AKP created hopes for a paradigm shift in Turkish politics in the aftermath of the elections. However the AKP's overemphasis on its brand name and its consequent monopolization of the democratization process, excluding Turkey's other parties, have raised concerns over the fulfillment of a more profoundly democratic participatory system in Turkey. Moreover, the AKP's adoption of populist rhetoric and stereotypes, which is usually the hallmark of Turkey's right-wing traditionalist parties, raises further concerns. Finally, the failure of the main opposition CHP to form a coherent platform to challenge the AKP's monopoly over Turkey's political scene has contributed to the growing skepticism for a new democratic political paradigm in Turkey.*

## Introduction

It was obvious to almost anyone keeping an eye on Turkish politics that the Justice and Development Party (AKP) would emerge victorious from the June 12, 2011 elections in Turkey. The actual election results surprised many only because of the margin of the AKP's victory, for few expected an increase in the AKP's share of votes for a third consecutive term. The election results have shown that since the last elections in 2007, the AKP has increased its votes by 3% and reached the threshold of 50%, which in effect meant twice as much support as its closest follower, the Republican People's Party (CHP). Moreover, the AKP's popularity for the first time since 2002 elections did not seem to involve reaction votes against the infringements of the military-led Kemalist establishment into the political sphere. To the contrary, the AKP seemed to owe a considerable part of its popularity to the electorate's retrospective voting approving its past performance in engaging with the Kemalist establish-

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ment and delivering material improvements in the daily lives of people in Turkey. The 2011 elections, in this respect, marked the emergence of the AKP as a political brand that guarantees the electorate's satisfaction, or at least, that is the most trustworthy, reliable and capable

political party more likely than any of its competitors to satisfy the electorate's demands. This was a huge success that firmly declared the AKP a predominant party, unusually free from the depleting impact of running the country and likely to win each and every free and fair election for the foreseeable future. The AKP's election declaration entitled "Turkey is Ready, Target is 2023," indicating a political horizon reaching as far as the centennial of the Republic, has therefore turned out to be not a pretentious assertion, but an acknowledgement of the fact that it is the most formidable political party planning and, all things being equal, likely to win at least three more elections until 2023.

This stunning success relied less than ever on the political qualities of individual members and candidates. Instead, it illustrated another aspect of the AKP's emergence as a political brand in which all members and candidates were rendered to a status of personnel of a highly coordinated and coherent party organization built around the personal charisma of its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and run practically by him. This peculiarity of the AKP came to light in both candidate selection and election campaign process. All candidates, including some prominent figures like AKP ministers and founders, were treated as personnel at the service of the party, owing their positions to the party, liable to non-nomination or removal from their traditional electoral districts and lacking any autonomous sphere of political self-realization. The AKP was so convinced of its brand name that it could afford not to nominate locally rooted strong candidates like some tribe leaders in the Southeastern provinces of Urfa and Siirt. The election campaign illustrated that it was the party itself and not the individual members that was the source of its power and success. In addition, the emphasis was not placed on the qualities of its candidates but on its future promises and projects. Moreover, none of the other parties, the election campaign and results have shown, matched the AKP in terms of organizational and ideational resources.

Compared to the internal struggle, organizational stagnation, and political incoherence that marred its two other competitors for the Turkish votes, the CHP and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), the AKP was able to mobilize a highly coherent and coordinated organizational structure for the elections. It started

preparing for the elections as early as February/March 2010, i.e., even before the High Election Council announced the schedule for the elections. To coordinate the preparations for the elections, the country was divided into six electoral regions with a member responsible for each. These coordinators acted as the deputies of the deputy chair responsible

for the AKP's election campaigns. In some districts like Izmir, Antalya, and Mersin, where it previously fared poorly, the AKP changed the members of the local organization entirely and named stronger candidates. In other districts, where the head of the organization was likely to be nominated, s/he was taken off from the post in time so that the risk of working with a freshly appointed administration would be avoided. Meanwhile, the party organization was expanded by organizing in 957 sub-provinces, 1875 towns (*belde*), and 53,375 villages, and deepened by establishing nine-member "Ballot Box Executive Committees" (*Sandık Yönetim Kurulları*) in 45% of the total number of ballot boxes. This way, a total of 741,251 AKP members were mobilized for canvassing the area of their ballot box. Towards the end of the election campaign, the AKP leader Erdoğan also called to duty around 3 million members by sending a personal text message to their mobile phones, to which they apparently responded positively. Moreover, most of those who were turned down by the AKP for candidacy, i.e. the vast majority of the 5,599 applicants, 167 of which were the AKP parliamentarians, have continued to work for the AKP in the election campaign. Finally, for the last three months before the Election Day, the party organizations were kept open, serving tea and coffee for 24 hours.<sup>1</sup>

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What made the 2011 elections more interesting than the magnitude of the AKP's anticipated victory was that the unprecedented hope for a new paradigm of politics, which existed before the election campaign, quickly faded when the election campaign started. The hope was for realizing the constitutive,<sup>2</sup> and constitution-making capacities of civilian politics for the first time since the transition to multiparty politics in 1950. This hope by and large was generated by the reduced political weight of the Kemalist establishment<sup>3</sup> throughout the course of the last few years. Traditionally, the Kemalist establishment defined the legitimate sphere of politics in rather narrow terms and acted as the most effective political force checking and balancing the civilian politics from an unaccountable above-politics position. It was such circumcision of the constitutive capacities of politics

that aggravated many of Turkey's political problems. With the transformation of the Kemalist establishment into an ineffective network, the whole political structure built on its anticipated power has started to crumble and created a space for the emergence of potential partners to constitutive politics, in which such perennial problems as the Kurdish issue could finally be resolved in a collaborative and democratic manner. The main opposition CHP's decision in the Spring of 2010 to change the staunchly Kemalist leadership and policies as well as the AKP's election promise of *delivering* "advanced democracy" seemed to have substantiated this hope. Indeed, the talk of promulgating a new constitution, finding a final resolution of the Kurdish issue, and defending the autonomy of politics to the veto imposed by the High Election Council on some independent candidates supported by the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) furthered the hopes for a new politics in Turkey.

The legacy of the AKP's engagement with the Kemalist establishment and the AKP's campaign strategy, however, hold the seeds of a fading hope. The former resulted in the consolidation of the polarization along the pro and anti AKP lines, which hinders the possibilities of compromise and consensus that are essential for a constitutive politics. The latter, in contrast, entailed not only an ill-defined and unsubstantiated promise of "advanced democracy," but also a populist political language which, while claiming to be the one and only democratic and democratizing political force, inevitably degraded the rest as unviable and unreliable political forces, deserving to be excluded from a possible constitutive politics. In the election campaign, all the defects of experiencing democratization as a *delivery* of the AKP, or the monopolization of Turkey's recent democratization by the AKP, came to the fore. Therefore, the possibilities of realizing the constitutive capacities of politics in a cooperative manner seemed no less difficult now, than when it was under the gloomy weight of the Kemalist establishment.

In what follows, this paper first seeks to unravel what is "negative" in the "positive" by focusing on the legacy of the forced retreat of the Kemalist establishment. Once this negative legacy is identified, the paper will turn to the analysis of the AKP's election campaign, so as to reveal its shortcomings in overcoming the challenges that the negative legacy poses to it as the would-be initiator of constitutive politics.

### **Forced Retreat of the Kemalist Establishment**

Free and fair elections in the "old" Turkish politics did not provide the elected governments with sufficient wherewithal to run the country. They only determined

the partner(s) of the Kemalist establishment in power-sharing. The AKP was not approved as a legitimate partner to share power by the Kemalist establishment. To the contrary, despite being elected with an overwhelming majority, it had been defined and treated as a serious threat to the secular regime in Turkey since 2002. This in turn compelled the AKP to a struggle of survival as a political entity and as the duly elected government of the country. In this struggle, the AKP's self-empowerment *vis-à-vis* the Kemalist establishment epitomized democratization and has become a precondition for any talk of further democratization in Turkey.<sup>4</sup> The AKP's survival/power strategy prioritized boosting its own legitimacy by showing a positive performance in a number of policy areas to deliver concrete improvements in daily life, and by consistently upholding the principle of the supremacy of the national will, i.e., the constitutionally elected governments, over the non-elected and non-accountable Kemalist state apparatus. These two have constituted the material and normative basis of the AKP's popularity respectfully.

One policy performance area that boosted the AKP's legitimacy was foreign affairs.<sup>5</sup> The AKP's pro-EU membership and pro-Western policy line helped to inject the Turkish people with a hope of a better future, change Turkey's image as an underperforming democracy, improve the investment climate, and emphasize that unlike its predecessor the Welfare Party (RP), it is not a reincarnation of anti-Western and illiberal Islamism. The AKP also delivered other concrete improvements in the daily lives of the Turkish people by maintaining economic stability and growth, by increasing the purchasing power, and by improving the conditions and services especially in three major areas, namely education, healthcare and social security, and transportation systems. All of the AKP's material deliveries, which in the election campaign provided the basis of a series of newspaper advertisements with the banner of "it was a dream that came through" (*Hayaldi Gerçek Oldu*), have enabled the AKP to claim that it has fulfilled its 2002 promise of delivering modernization, understood in terms of better infrastructure and public services, and effective public administration matching the Western standards, rather than cultural Westernization along Kemalist lines.

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e-memorandum and the Constitutional Court's arbitrary redefinition of the rules of the game in 2007. Both initiatives aimed at preventing the AKP from installing its candidate as the President of the Republic. To the e-memorandum, affirming the military's willingness and readiness to intervene directly should the AKP insist on its choice of the presidential candidate, the AKP government responded by taking an unprecedented course of action. It reasserted, in a televised press conference, the subservient position of the armed forces in democracies and called for early elections to renew its legitimacy, in which it increased its votes by 12% to 47%. To the Constitutional Courts' arbitrary redefinition of the parliamentary quorum in presidential elections, it responded by amending the constitution, so as to change the election method of the president to popular vote.

Second, as it endured in the government, the AKP could gradually take over the key positions or infiltrate into key institutions that once were exclusively reserved for the Kemalists. The staunchly Kemalist constitutional lawyer that once occupied the seat of the President of the Republic was replaced with an AKP founder in 2007. Afterwards, the presidency of High Education Council, which monitors the universities and plays a crucial role in the appointment of their rectors, was taken over by AKP-friendly figures. Similarly, the top echelons of the judiciary is no longer reserved for members of a caste-like network of Kemalist lawyers thanks to a number of constitutional amendments approved by the people in the 2010 referendum.

Third, the AKP has restricted the legal-institutional sphere of the military's influence through a series of reforms. For example, it altered the composition and political profile of the National Security Council, which once was the real political decision-making body. The annulment of the EMASYA protocol, which allowed the military authorities to by-pass civilian authorities in responding to social incidents, can also be considered as an example of the legal-institutional reforms introduced by the AKP governments.

Finally, the AKP governments have rendered the military subject to public scrutiny by creating an atmosphere conducive to the publicizing of scandalous

instances of the military personnel's arbitrariness and irresponsible behaviour, as well as the plots to destabilize and eventually overthrow the government. Moreover, unlike the centrist governments of the past, the AKP did not perpetuate the military's institutional autonomy by referring these cases to high military authorities only. Instead, the AKP displayed a willingness to hold those responsible accountable by submitting them to judicial and administrative investigations. Consequently, the AKP has forced the military and its allies to retreat and thereby shook the whole political structure built on its anticipated political role. That the AKP's prevailing victory over the Kemalist establishment has compelled the pro-establishment mass media outlets and the main opposition CHP to adopt moderate policies is a testament to its profound impact. With this track record, the AKP can, and did, take pride in delivering material improvements, and in not surrendering to the Kemalist establishment. Thus, the AKP did not betray the trust of the people, and for this it was seen as protecting the democratic regime from Kemalist encroachments.

### **The Negative Legacies for Constitutive Politics**

These positive developments, however, have carried elements hindering the possibility of a paradigm shift to constitutive politics in the aftermath of the 2011 elections. First of all, the retreat of the military-led Kemalist establishment was a result of the AKP's alteration of power balance in its own favour. If the military now remains muted on many of the issues it once monopolized, it is because the AKP governments have managed to change the terms and conditions of its operation. The apparent supremacy and autonomy of civilian politics, in other words, does not necessarily indicate an institutionalization and internalization of it on the part of the military-led Kemalist establishment.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the military since the last days of 2010 has publicly expressed its concerns about the recognition of Kurdish as the second language of the country and about the alternative non-official narrations of republican history.<sup>7</sup> It has also publicly criticized the detainments of the officers suspected of plotting coups against the AKP government and made gestures of solidarity with them.<sup>8</sup> The current supremacy of civilian politics, therefore, is dependent upon the power of the AKP. As such, it runs the risk of being a circumstantial situation, perpetuated by the power position of the AKP only. The AKP leader Erdoğan himself described "the current situation as a case of strengthened-belief in democracy rather than broken-resistance of those willing to divert to anti-democratic paths."<sup>9</sup> This statement implicitly acknowledges the need for "more-to-do" to ensure a full-scale institutionalized civilianization. However, whether the AKP is willing to do more or remain content with main-



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taining the current status quo by only prolonging its power position is another question that has important implications for the possibilities of constitutive politics.

Secondly, Turkey's civilianization-cum-democratization in the form of the AKP's prevailing position over the Kemalist establishment seems to have deepened and consolidated the social

and political polarization that was initiated by the military in the mid-1990s, between secular and Islamic societal sectors. This can be seen in the election process of the new members to high judicial bodies like the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors, Council of the State and Court of Appeals to fulfill the stipulations of the 2010 Constitutional amendments. In all of these elections, lawyers were divided into two groups, voting en bloc for the candidates of their own group. That the lists of one group was prepared by the AKP-run Ministry of Justice, and not by the autonomous organization of the non-Kemalist judges and prosecutors testifies to a tendency to lean on the power of the AKP, which in turn empowers the AKP further.

Moreover, civilianization and democratization in the form of the AKP's empowerment and prevailing over the Kemalist establishment did not seem to make the pro-Kemalist societal sectors come to terms with the rules of the democratic game. A considerable part of Turkish society still takes the political role of the military as exercised from an above-politics guardian-of-the-regime position and welcomes a military intervention to save the regime from the AKP. This was shown in the findings of a nationwide survey, in which 29% of the respondents agreed with the statement that the Ergenekon investigation (into the network of military-led coup plotters) is to intimidate the opposition, 52.3% of respondents did not see the investigation as an opportunity to strengthen democracy, 44.7% did not find the judiciary impartial, and 46% thought that Ergenekon trials were not proceeding fairly.<sup>10</sup> Hence, the "new" CHP, like the "old" one, continues to claim that the Ergenekon investigation is an AKP plot to arrest and intimidate AKP opponents.<sup>11</sup> It is not just a mouthpiece of the Kemalist establishment, but also represents a considerable portion of society. This deep social divide was illustrated even at the level of the top businessmen's association, TUSIAD. After strongly backing a progressively liberal constitution proposal in a well-publicized meeting, TUSIAD's administration, in the face of harshly-worded internal oppo-



sition, was obliged to shift its position to being an impartial platform-provider for the drafters of the proposal.<sup>12</sup> From another angle, Islamic circles' increasing integration within the state apparatus since 2002, and the consequent impoverishment of Islamism as well as the critical outlook that comes with it, resulted in an almost unconditional support for the AKP government.<sup>13</sup> These trends, resistance of certain segments of Turkey's political scene, and entrenched opposing social blocks, therefore, can be considered as illustrations of the consolidation of social polarization that hinders the establishment of constitutive politics in Turkey.

Thirdly, after the bankruptcy of pro-Kemalist opposition strategies banking on yet another military-led intervention to oust the AKP from government, the main opposition CHP had to be ready for a change of strategy. But what seems to shape the "new" CHP is a shallow Kemalist diagnosis that explains the rise and predominance of the AKP because of the demise of the center-right political tradition without ever considering what were the real causes of its demise in the first place. Consequently, the "new" CHP decided to stop being a pro-military negativist political party, criticizing anything and everything the AKP government does, without offering any policy alternatives. It finally chose to model itself after the center-right political parties. In so doing, the CHP, usually known to be on the left side of the political spectrum, accepted that two thirds majority of the Turkish electorate is right wing and rebranded itself as a center right political party to appeal to them. Hence, the new CHP tried to realize its declared intention to gain the support of the center-right electorate<sup>14</sup> by recruiting some center right politicians as candidates, by making anti-militarist and pro-democratization gestures, and by taking on all the populist and 'personalistic' features of the center right tradition in Turkey.

Setting aside the viability and validity of center right politics in the current Turkish political context, the CHP failed to revive social democracy and recruit people into its ranks. More importantly, the problem still remained that the "new" CHP did not seem genuine, sincere, principled, coherent, and credible enough to make promises and deliver on them. To cast off its image as a pro-military political party, it called for the investigation of those responsible for posting the e-memorandum on the web site of the Chief of the Staff during presidential elections in 2007. However, it did so in a way that confirmed its pro-military image. In fact, the "new" CHP considered the e-memorandum more as a conspiracy for

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the re-election of the AKP than as an infringement on democracy and wanted its perpetrators to be investigated on these grounds.<sup>15</sup> The “new” CHP also submitted a bill to change article 35 of Turkish Armed Forces’ Internal Service Law, which is often claimed to provide the legal pretext for military interventions in politics, for it assigns the military the task of protecting the Republic. But

then, the bill it proposed seemed to clarify the acceptable types of military intervention rather than indicate a categorical refusal of them.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the “new” CHP produced a democratization program, but refrained from disclosing it to a broader audience than a select group of columnists, perhaps not to commit itself to it. It recognized that the Kurdish issue is not just a matter of armed violence or economic development, but also a matter of expressing the Kurdish identity in the public and political spheres. But then, it removed its own campaign bills printed in Kurdish from the billboards in Tunceli, the Kurdish speaking hometown of its leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu.<sup>17</sup> Kılıçdaroğlu also emphasized his willingness to solve the Kurdish issue *at any cost*,<sup>18</sup> but then made his contribution to the resolution of the issue *conditional upon* either the disclosure of the secret talks with the PKK leader Ocalan or the Prime Minister’s apology first on misleading the people that the CHP is favoring a federal system.<sup>19</sup>

The “new” CHP also tried to go beyond its traditionally affluent and well-educated constituency by coming up with concrete proposals and projects of material improvement in the daily life of the lower classes, like family insurance and free education for all. But then, when questioned about the availability of resources to realize such promises, Kılıçdaroğlu resorted to the populist and ‘personalistic’ language of the center-right, either by claiming that he can find the resources simply because “his name was Kemal” or by pledging that he would resign if he could not deliver on his promises by the end of four months.<sup>20</sup> As such, like the center right political parties in the past, the CHP also seemed ready to promise anything and everything to gain the votes of the electorate. Meanwhile, discrediting the AKP by borrowing from the vocabulary of right-wing politics, such terms as unfruitful (*bereketsiz*), corrupt (*hortumcu*), and rentier<sup>21</sup> did neither match the reality, nor fit into the language of a leftist secularist party. In the final analysis, therefore, the “new” CHP seemed to be both maladapted and unrealistic for future constitutive politics.



Photo: AA, Ibrahim Yakut

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### **Is the AKP an Asset for Democratization? Lessons from the Election Campaign**

The possibility of constitutive politics was created by the AKP's win over the Kemalist establishment, which quintessentially has been at the core of Turkey's recent democratization. This enabled the AKP to take pride in democratizing the country and at the same time gave it an opportunity to show its credentials in furthering Turkey's democratization. In fact, the AKP in its election campaign promoted itself as the one and only genuine and capable democratizing political force in Turkey. Other than an emphasis on its track record in engaging with the Kemalist establishment, this self-promotion entailed a vague promise of an ill-defined "advanced democracy." The AKP, in other words, did not put forward a coherent and concrete political vision for Turkey's future democratization and commit itself to it. Moreover, since its election promise of "advanced democracy"

was weak in content, the AKP seemed to emphasize its positive track record in struggling against the Kemalist establishment more than its future ideas and projects. As such, the AKP's self-portrayal as the one and only democratizing force was in effect asking for the electorate's trust in the AKP, or more accurately in its charismatic leader Erdoğan, as the only reliable and capable political force that would deliver whatever is deliverable in terms of democratization. Such a claim of credibility and monopolization of the democratization agenda was made possible by the past performance of the AKP. This means that Turkey's recent democratization was delivered by the AKP in spite of the opposition, which still continued to fail in generating a viable alternative to the AKP in terms of democratization. Still, the monopolization of the democratization process by simply asking the electorate to trust the AKP in matters of democratization and without commitment to a coherent democratization agenda runs counter to democratic constitutive politics for two reasons. First, the monopolization of the democratization process involves a populist language that categorically excludes the others from Turkey's future constitutive politics. Second, the AKP's "trust us we can and will democratize whenever and wherever it is possible" approach does not bode well for the spirit of democratic politics. Still, judging by the share of its votes, one could suggest that the AKP has established such a relationship of trust with the electorate and declares that it is the political brand standing for democratization in Turkey. That is perhaps where the real success of the AKP lies. Yet, it is precisely this success that can also be one of the biggest obstacles to constitutive politics for democratization, because it should not be an issue delegated to a single party.

In its election campaign, the AKP has promoted itself as the only true and benevolent provider of the nation regardless of the nature of the goods to be provided, be it modernization in the form of improving the daily life or democratization mostly in the form of civilianization and expansion of the political sphere. The AKP's belief in being the only democratizing force is reflected in its self-definition of its *raison d'être* to overcome Turkey's democracy deficit, and in the claim that there is no alternative to the AKP in resolving societal issues, including the Kurdish issue.<sup>22</sup> Facilitated by the past and present absence of an equally democratizing force, the AKP's tendency to monopolize the task of democratization resulted in its ownership of the democratization process, which ran contrary to the nature of democracy as a collective good and, thus, produced somewhat paradoxical counter-democratic manifestations. For instance, in realizing the main item of its "advanced democracy" promise, i.e., the replacement of the current constitution promulgated by the 1980-1983 coup administration with a liberal democratic one, the AKP promised to be consensus-seeking. At the same time, however, it carried

out an election campaign with the priority of gaining enough seats (between 330 and 367) to make the new constitution alone or to be able to submit its own draft to referendum. The apparent paradox here, between the willingness to draft a new constitution on its own and search for a consensus, can only be understood in the context of the AKP's distrust for other political parties and subsequent monopolization of the democratization process. This is also the reason why the AKP considers entering into any political race of proposing these democratizing reforms as futile. This was illustrated in the AKP's response to the "new" CHP's proposal to render the military Chief of Staff responsible to the Minister of Defense rather than the Prime Minister. The adopted proposal had become a symbol of civilian supremacy, at least since the early 1990s. Erdoğan, however, did not jump into the CHP's bandwagon in earnest, but drew attention to the importance of taking action to realize it: "Many leaders have passed saying these sorts of things, which one of them ever took action? We will do it in time, i.e., when the time is ripe."<sup>23</sup> In this way, he not only claimed credibility on the basis of being the only realistic and capable political force, but also implicitly discredited the CHP for engaging in electoral politicking by making empty promises.

The AKP's overall approach to the Kurdish issue has differed from the militarist approach that had been the conventional wisdom until recently

Defining the progress achieved thus far in democratization as "normalization" and taking pride in "normalizing" the country, the AKP promised to deliver "advanced democracy" in its third term. However, leaving aside the question if an advanced democracy can be the work/delivery of a single political party, the AKP's "advanced democracy" itself was weak in content. Two key promises in the advanced democracy section of the election declaration were: (1) the promulgation of a new constitution, and (2) the resolution of the Kurdish issue.<sup>24</sup> Since numerous amendments to the constitution have toned down its anti-democratic spirit and stipulations, the resolution of the Kurdish issue has become a stronger reason for making a new constitution and a more decisive litmus test for any party claiming to be democratic and democratizing. Since its rise to the office in 2002, the AKP's overall approach to the Kurdish issue has differed from the militarist approach that had been the conventional wisdom until recently. The AKP recognized the identity aspects of the Kurdish issue, facilitated a relatively open-minded public debate about the possible resolutions of it, oscillated between accepting and rejecting the pro-Kurdish BDP as a partner to the solution of the issue, and eventually produced a Kurdish opening. The Kurdish opening was stalled due to

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Kemalist resistance and the AKP's mismanagement. But more importantly, the validity and viability of it was questioned for being "an *ad hoc* process of politicking" in response to the institutionalization and increased electoral strength of the PKK-affiliated ethno-nationalist Kurdish movement, represented in the political arena by the BDP.<sup>25</sup> Although the relatively open political debate on the

Kurdish issue has created a sense of democratization, the AKP was also criticized for trying to define and resolve the Kurdish issue in the AKP's own terms, and without recognizing the existence of a Kurdish issue, as defined by the political representatives of the Kurdish movement, i.e., the BDP and without recognizing them as partners. In fact, the AKP in its election declaration and rallies considered the BDP a part of the problem, but not the solution.<sup>26</sup>

In fact, the AKP's approach towards the Kurdish issue was determined by an effort to sideline its main competitor for the Kurdish votes, the BDP. The AKP was intent on emerging as the true representative of the Kurdish people in Turkey, and thereby substantiate its claim to be the one and only democratic and democratizing force. This entailed, first, declaring the Kurdish issue over, so that the whole discourse and indeed the reason for the existence of the BDP could be rejected. Erdoğan declared the Kurdish issue "over" on the grounds that the AKP governments in the last years had brought the policies of denial, rejection, and assimilation of the Kurdish identity to an end.<sup>27</sup> In declaring the Kurdish issue over and, thus, rejecting the need for the BDP, Erdoğan, however, employed the political discourse of the militarist 1990s, i.e., Kurds can be parliamentarians, ministers and presidents.<sup>28</sup> He thus rejected the need for further legal-institutional reforms for the resolution of the Kurdish issue and wanted to maintain the status quo that favors the AKP. In this respect, he declared the 10% national electoral threshold, which allows the AKP to amplify its electoral power in regions dominated by Kurdish populations at the expense of that of the BDP, irrelevant to the democratization process.<sup>29</sup>

Secondly, the AKP tried to sideline the BDP by highlighting its own past and future capability of delivering economic development and material improvements to the Kurds in Turkey. Here, the BDP was depicted as a political party concerned exclusively with the public/political expression of the Kurdish identity and as responsible and responsive only to the PKK organization, which intimidates the



Kurds into supporting the BDP by using armed violence. As such, the BDP was unable and unwilling to deliver material goods to the Kurds. Perhaps more importantly, Erdoğan emphasized the AKP's ability to deliver material improvements in a manner rejecting the identity aspects of the issue, and overlapping and competing with the discourse of the ultranationalist MHP's leader, Devlet Bahçeli.

Like Bahçeli, who in his Diyarbakır election rally desperately tried to persuade the Kurds to drop their demands for education in their mother tongue because it will not fill their stomachs, Erdoğan questioned the demands for changing the name of Diyarbakır to Amed in Kurdish by asking "will your garbage be collected and streets be clean after that?" In this way, the AKP tried to outdo not only the BDP in its expression of the level of concern about the well-being of the Kurdish electorate, but also the MHP, its main competitor for the Turkish nationalist votes, trying to show off a higher degree of nationalism. The latter strategy was furthered by cornering the MHP for acquiescing to the suspension of the execution of PKK leader Ocalan's death sentence in 1999. In an attempt to show up the MHP in its commitment to nationalism, Erdoğan declared that he would have had Ocalan hanged.<sup>30</sup> In this way, both the MHP and the BDP were declared as politically redundant, as far as representing the true interests of the people, because the AKP had it covered.

Thirdly, in line with its emphasis on religion as the bond that unites the Turks and the Kurds, who are generally said to be religious people, the AKP tried to marginalize the BDP by referring to its weak/false religiosity. Here, the BDP's reaction to what it deemed the political use of religion by the AKP provided the AKP with raw material to make a case that the BDP is anti-religion and, thus, not deserving the support of the religious Kurds. In response to the mobilization of the personnel of the Directorate of Religious Affairs in the Southeastern provinces, a reimplementation of the statist recipe of the late 1980s, the BDP reacted by mobilizing its supporters to refuse praying with state-appointed prayer leaders and to organize alternative prayers in alternative places. Erdoğan and the pro-Islamic media harshly criticized these reactions. Erdoğan furthered his claims criticizing the false/weak religiosity of the BDP by drawing attention to statements made by the BDP-friendly circles declaring the PKK leader Öcalan as the prophet of the Kurds, and Zoroastrianism as their true religion.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, Erdoğan accused the BDP

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of being so anti-religion as to prevent Kurdish children from learning their religion and leveling accusations against the BDP of committing arson of the religious Prayer Leader and Preacher School students' dormitories.<sup>32</sup> Finally, when it hit the headlines of the pro-Islamic mass media outlets that pro-BDP circles recited the call to prayer in Kurdish, the

AKP did not lose a moment to make analogous references to the authoritarian and militantly secular single party era (1923-1946) and depict the BDP as anti-religion as the CHP, which in 1938 prohibited the reciting of call to prayer in Arabic.<sup>33</sup>

To sum up, the AKP has sustained its claim to be the one and only democratizing political force representing the true interests of the Kurdish people by trying to render its main competitor for the Kurdish vote redundant. In so doing, it either declared the BDP as a part of the problem or accused it of generating the problem, which in Erdoğan's terms was resolved in the course of last years. This strategy was furthered by charging the BDP with being unconcerned about the well-being and religious sensitivities of the Kurds, and thus out of touch with the "real" hopes and demands of the Kurdish people.

This attitude of rejecting the other political parties as potential partners in constitutive politics continued in the AKP's election strategy against the predominantly Turkish political parties as well. In promoting itself as the only capable and reliable political brand in providing the nation with all sorts of goods, the AKP put all the other political parties in the same basket and did so by using the main populist stereotypes of Turkish politics.<sup>34</sup> The most recent source of the AKP's strategy to create two blocks, the AKP versus the rest of the political parties, can be traced back to the 2010 referendum on the constitutional amendments, in which all major political parties positioned themselves against the AKP. The AKP vs. the Rest strategy was also reminiscent of its predecessor, the Islamist Welfare Party's portrayal of the elections as a competition between two parties: the party of the absolute right representing the true will of the nation and represented by the WP itself and the parties of the absolute wrong, representing the interests of the imperialist-Zionist West and comprising all the rest of the political class. In the 1980s, the Motherland Party governments used a similar populist strategy. The Motherland's leader, Turgut Özal, reproduced the anti-political language of the 1980-83 coup administration and categorized all the rest of the political class as ideological, conflict ridden, unable to serve people and responsible for the political instability and violence that

had resulted in the 1980 coup. The AKP did not exactly reproduce the Welfare Party's polarizing approach for it claimed to represent a break from the Islamist tradition. But in an attempt to appeal to the pragmatist sentiments of the centrist electorate, the AKP, in its election campaign, has borrowed considerably from the anti-political language of the 1980s and reproduced the main stigmas and stereotypes of Turkey's right-wing populism. According to the AKP, the competition of the 2011 elections was a fight between the "new politics" of the AKP, which has the ability to meet the nation's true hopes and demands, and the "dirty old politics" of the "Rest," which is based on making exaggerated promises to deceive people. The "Rest," in essence, is unconcerned with the wellbeing of the people and would, therefore, not refrain from risking the long-term economic stability of the country for the sake of outdoing the AKP in its promises of material improvement. In this way, the AKP stated that it stood for neoliberal economic orthodoxy, but it used a considerable amount of political and cultural populism to achieve its message.

The AKP centered its election campaign on the concrete improvements it has delivered in the course of the last nine years. As a corollary, it asked the electorate to vote retrospectively on the basis of the services and improvements (*hizmet*) they have received, and not on the basis of ideological convictions, which Erdoğan associated with narrow-mindedness and "fan mentality." The AKP strengthened this emphasis on service-delivery and modernization by coming up with such landmark projects as constructing an artificial canal, a third bridge and two satellite cities in Istanbul, building satellite cities in Ankara and İzmir, and increasing investment to utilize such technological applications as smart board and e-books broadly in education. In calling the electorate to vote retrospectively and pragmatically on the basis of the improvements they have enjoyed, and will enjoy in future, Erdoğan, however, showed that he barred ideological criticism from the political sphere and reduced politics to delivery of goods only. Here, the rest of the political parties were portrayed either as unconcerned with the well-being of people or as blind to their needs and demands because of their ideological convictions and priorities. They were, thus, not only incapable of delivering on their excessive promises and unrealistic projects, but also a threat to the stability, growth, and modernization achieved under the AKP governments.

The rest of the political parties were portrayed either as unconcerned with the well-being of people or as blind to their needs and demands because of their ideological convictions and priorities

This strategy of categorization of the rest of the political actors as irrelevant as far as further democratization and modernization in Turkey is concerned has become most visible in Erdoğan's discourse against the main opposition CHP. Recognizing the CHP's oscillation between the old and the new, Erdoğan rejected the process of change the CHP is going through and claimed that there is no such thing as the "new" CHP. The CHP, according to Erdoğan, was the same old CHP of coup plotters and supporters, who would never come to power by winning elections because they were disrespectful to the values of the nation, unconcerned about the well-being of the people, and even willing to obstruct those who work for serving the people. This claim was substantiated by drawing attention regularly to the CHP's above-mentioned portrayal of the Ergenekon investigation as intimidation of the opponents and to the nomination of some Ergenekon suspects as candidates upon the advice of Süleyman Demirel, whose name epitomizes the military-friendly and populist center-right tradition in Turkey. Accordingly, the CHP was the same old party of tutelary regime and pro-status quo forces that want Turkey to return to the days of instability and poverty and that now, following its new mentor Demirel, engages in cheap populist politics of making any promise to deceive the people into voting for them. As such, the CHP was still trying to obstruct those who work for serving the nation, i.e., the AKP. The portrayal of AKP supporters as idiots (*beyinsiz*) by some CHP circles and the criticism of a Quranic verse (every living body shall taste death) engraved on the gate of a cemetery in Istanbul by an CHP candidate were the most often cited cases to illustrate the CHP's disrespect for the values and choices of the nation.<sup>35</sup> These positions, according to Erdoğan, have shown once again that the CHP is the same anti-religion tutelary party that provoked and supported the 1960 coup against the Democrat Party (DP) government, which in 1950 took over the government from the CHP in the first free and fair elections in Republican Turkey. It is also the same party that helped the military authorities to hang the DP leader Adnan Menderes, which closed the mosques or turned them into stables and that banned the reciting of call to prayer in Arabic.<sup>36</sup> Now that this party is trying to appear as sympathetic to the demands and hopes of the people, Erdoğan argued, is a deception as the rich history of unmet promises of the center right political parties illustrates.

## Conclusion

The AKP believes that it is the one and only democratizing and modernizing political force in Turkey. Given the fact that the recent progress in both has been its handy work, despite a pro-Kemalist conservative opposition, this belief is not ungrounded. Moreover, the continuing failure of the main opposition CHP and

the Kurdish BDP to act as political forces autonomous from extra-political organizations has consolidated this self-belief in being a singular democratizing force. The AKP has built its election campaign on this belief-cum-fact. Its goal for the 2001 elections was to obtain as many seats in

A crisis in the immediate aftermath of the elections gave the AKP the opportunity to reaffirm its pre-election political stance

Parliament for it to be able to draft the new constitution on its own. Although the AKP increased its share to almost 50% of the votes cast, the actual election results, however, fell short of the AKP's expectations in terms of the number of seats it gained. With its 326 seats, the AKP was four seats short to submit any constitutional bill to referendum. This configuration compels the AKP to seek a consensus in making the new constitution. However, this approach is difficult because the AKP's leadership has vehemently dismissed the rest of the political class.

A crisis in the immediate aftermath of the elections gave the AKP the opportunity to reaffirm its pre-election political stance. The crisis began first with an irreversible decision of the High Election Council, annulling the election of a BDP-affiliated independent candidate from Diyarbakır, Hatip Dicle, on the grounds of a court decision convicting and thus rendering him ineligible to stand for elections. This was followed by the judiciary's decision to decline the requests of three detained Ergenekon suspects, elected on the tickets of the CHP and MHP, to be released so that they could join the parliament. The BDP and the CHP reacted to these decisions by refusing to take oath, which is a constitutional obligation to take part in the parliamentary activities. They both argued that the sanctity of the ballot-box had been violated by the judiciary, allegedly under the heavy influence of the AKP. The BDP also declared that it would convene its parliamentary group meetings in Diyarbakır until the AKP amends the relevant laws to make Dicle eligible for election and renews the elections for Diyarbakır. The CHP, on the other hand, called on the AKP to use its influence/control over the judiciary or amend the relevant laws so that its imprisoned deputies could be released. This in fact was an implicit confession by the CHP itself of its sense of powerlessness and surrender to the will of the AKP.

The AKP, not surprisingly, did not take any initiative for the release of the imprisoned deputies, so as not to fall into the trap of proving the BDP's and CHP's case that the judiciary's decisions were political or the judiciary was under the control of the AKP. Instead, the AKP accused the CHP and the BDP of vacating the legitimate political platforms at the expense of representation assigned to them by the people. This, in turn, was portrayed as a confirmation of the fact

that neither the CHP, nor the BDP were responsible and responsive to the people, and that they were being held hostage by two extra-political organizations, the Ergenekon and the PKK respectively. The CHP deputies took the oath before the parliament recessed, thanks to a common declaration between the CHP and the AKP stating some general principles like “we all want to see the elected deputies in the parliament.” This involved no commitments on the part of the AKP, but providing the CHP with an “honorable exit.” The BDP is yet to join the parliament. The crisis of oath-taking was a bad start for the new parliament as far as the possibilities of constitutive politics is concerned. The AKP, however, did not and does not surrender to the opposition’s threats of moratorium and self-righteously continued to set the terms of the legitimate political debate and activity. The fact that it does not feel under pressure to immediately draft a new constitution, since it already amended the most important/functional articles, and that it is the most formidable political organization enjoying wide popularity certainly helps the AKP continue its political project.

## Endnotes

1. See, “Yüzde 50’nin Sırrını Star’a Anlattı,” *Star*, July 15, 2011.
2. Constitutive capacities of politics refer to rule-making and institution-building powers of politics in the course of accommodating and resolving the identity and interest differences and conflicts through compromise and consensus.
3. The Kemalist establishment refers to a military-friendly network of judges, academicians, bureaucrats, politicians, civil society organizations and think-tanks, which generate and exercise power through a matrix of formal and informal relations between themselves.
4. Menderes Çınar, “Turkey’s Present Ancien Regime and the Justice and Development Party,” Marlies Cassier and Joost Jongerden (eds.) *Nationalism and Political Islam in Turkey* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 13-27; Menderes Çınar, “Anti-Vesayetçiliğin Ötesinde Bir Demokrasi Gündemi Olacak mı?,” *Birikim*, No. 266 (2011), pp.10-25.
5. Burhanettin Duran, “AKP and Foreign Policy as an Agent of Transformation,” Hakan Yavuz (ed.), *The Emergence of a New Turkey* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2006).
6. For the intangible and potentially persistent aspects of the military’s resistance to the idea of civilian supremacy see, Çağkan Sayın, “Exploring the Military Mindset: Phenomenological Insights for Security Sector Reform in Turkey,” *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No. 43 (2010), pp.97-133.
7. “Genelkurmay: İki Dilden Endişeliyiz,” *Hürriyet*, December 18, 2010; “Tarih Muhtırasına Tepki,” *Taraf*, May 21 2011.
8. “TSK’dan Balyoz Çıkışı,” *Vatan*, April 7, 2011.
9. “Herkes Konumunu Gayet İyi Biliyor,” *Yeni Şafak*, May 29, 2011.
10. Ali Bayramoğlu, “Ergenekon, Yargı ve Toplum,” *Yeni Şafak*, March 26 2011; see also interview with Bekir Agadır, “Türkiye Alarm Veriyor,” *Özgür Gündem*, May 30, 2011.
11. Fikret Bila, “Kılıçdaroğlu: Kadın ve Gençlik Devrimi Yaptık,” *Milliyet*, April 12, 2011.
12. “Dik Duracağız,” *Milliyet*, April 24, 2011; “13 Maddeli Geri Adım,” *Taraf*, April 29, 2011.

13. Burhanettin Duran, "The Experience of Turkish Islamism: Between Transformation and Islamism," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol.12, No.1 (2010), pp. 5-22; Murat Tokay interview with Ali Bulaç and Etyen Mahcupyan, "İslamcılar Kendileriyle Yüzleşmekten Kaçıyor mu?," *Zaman*, June 5, 2011; Emeti Saruhan interview with Ahmet Arslan, "Kamusal Alan Dindarları Aşındırdı," *Yeni Şafak*, June 19, 2011; "Muhafazakarlar AKP'nin Yaptıklarını Sorgulamıyor," *Cumhuriyet*, May 21, 2011.

14. Fikret Bila, "Kılıçdaroğlu: Kadın ve Gençlik Devrimi Yaptık," *Milliyet*, April 12, 2011.

15. Fikret Bila, "Ayrışma Çok Tehlikeli ve Endişe Verici," *Milliyet*, July 28, 2010.

16. "Yetersizse Konuşuruz," *Taraf*, July 30, 2010.

17. "Dersimliler CHP'ye Zazaca 'Hayır' Diyecek," *Taraf*, May 24, 2011.

18. "Kürt Sorununu Kemal Kardeşiniz Çözecek," *Taraf*, June 1, 2011.

19. "Erdoğan Özur Dilemezse, Kürt Sorunun Çözümüne Katkı Sağlamam," *Zaman*, June 5, 2011; "İmralı'ya Ne Sözler Verildi Açıklansın," June 22, 2011.

20. "Yapamazsam Dört Ayda Bırakırım," *Milliyet*, May 26, 2011.

21. "Ye Ye Doymaz Bunlar," *Milliyet*, May 1, 2011; "AKP Rantın, CHP Halkın Partisi," *Vatan*, May 30, 2011; "Hortumlarını Keseceğiz," *Cumhuriyet*, May 30, 2011.

22. AK Party, *Election Declaration: Turkey is Ready, Target is 2023*, pp. 9, 13.

23. "Hala Reformcu Erdoğan'ım," *Taraf*, June 7, 2011.

24. Changing the Civil, the Associations' and the Foundations' Laws to strengthen the civil society and expand its participation; improvements in the judicial systems, security and public administration systems to render them more effective and efficient were the other promises made as part of advancing democracy in Turkey.

25. Marlies Cassier, Joost Jongerden and Nic Walker "Fruitless Attempts? The Kurdish Initiative and the Containment of the Kurdish Movement in Turkey," *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No. 44 (2011), pp. 103-128.

26. AK Party, *Election Declaration*, p. 13.

27. "Apo'yu Peygamber İlan Ediyorlar," *Milliyet*, May 1, 2011.

28. June 9 2011, *ATV TV Channel*.

29. "Size Soracak Değiliz," *Hürriyet*, 1 April 4, 2011.

30. "Biz Öcalan'ı Asardık," *Radikal*, June 10, 2011.

31. "Apo'yu Peygamber İlan Ediyorlar," *Milliyet*, May 1, 2011.

32. "Müslüman Yetişmesin Diye Kürt Çocuklarını Yakıyorlar," *Hürriyet*, May 30, 2011.

33. "Kürtçe Ezan Tek Parti Zülmü," *Star*, June 9, 2011.

34. For an exemplary speech of Erdoğan see the full text of his election rally in Giresun on 14 May, 2011, available at: <http://www.akparti.org.tr/site/haberler/bizim-kitabimizda-ayrimcilik-yoktur/7728>.

35. "Meydanda 'Beyinsiz' Atışması," *Taraf*, May 31, 2011; "Allah'ın Ayetine Sinir Bozucu Dedi,"

36. See for example the full text of Erdoğan's election rally in Giresun, available at: <http://www.akparti.org.tr/site/haberler/bizim-kitabimizda-ayrimcilik-yoktur/7728>