

# The Armenian Community and the AK Party: Finding Trust under the Crescent

VAHRAM TER-MATEVOSYAN\*

## ABSTRACT

*This article aims to explore one of the critical and relatively understudied dimensions of Turkish politics: the complex characteristics of interactions between the Armenian community (mainly Gregorian Orthodox Christians) and the incumbent government of the Justice and Development Party. Two interrelated questions are raised below: Why did the relationship between the AK Party and the Armenian community become an important topic to discuss? What repercussions did the assassination of Hrant Dink in 2007 have on relations between the Turkish government and the Armenian community? The answers to these questions can help us better understand why a majority party with Islamic roots produced more reliable bonds for the Christian minority than previous governments with their more secular backgrounds and political agendas. I argue that the Armenian community in Turkey is in a constant quest for a secure socio-political climate where it can safely preserve its cultural, ethnic and religious identity. Hence, the political agenda of the AK Party essentially matched the Armenian community's aspirations for large-scale reforms, which paved the way for a period of vigilant collaboration that remained in effect until the assassination of Hrant Dink.*

The arguments made in this paper should make a modest contribution to a somewhat intensified effort to understand this particular topic. Since the 1920s, the peculiar essence of interactions between the application of the secular principles of the republic and the accent of political Islam has been on the agenda of Turkey's political discourse. Freedom of religion comprises freedom of belief, conscience and worship; that is, the right to practice one's religion unhindered. A constitutional counterpart of religious freedom is a duty for the state to exercise religious and ideological neutrality. In Turkey, undoubtedly, this religious neutrality remains a scarce commodity. The only religious freedom which is truly guaranteed is that of those who conform to the Sunni variant of Islam supported by the state.<sup>1</sup>

Citizenship is another important matter of concern. The basic characteristics of Turkish

\* Senior Research Fellow, Department of Turkish Studies, Institute for Oriental Studies, National Academy of Sciences of Armenia, [termatevos@yahoo.com](mailto:termatevos@yahoo.com)

AK Party, by representing the periphery of politics, was devoid of previous elitist constraints and characteristics; instead it incorporated a non-conventional approach to identity

citizenship, established during the founding years of the Turkish state, include the following distinguishing features: subordination of the individual to the objectives of political unity, i.e. acceptance of the Muslim majority as an organic totality, and a civic-territorial, secular and republican, duty-based-passive identity.

The features of the new Turkish citizen were completely different from the Ottoman model of membership and political community.<sup>2</sup> To support this point, it is sufficient to refer to the general nostalgic sympathy among the Armenians towards the pre-20<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman period, when the Armenian community enjoyed more religious, political and cultural freedoms than it did in the Republican period. It is taken for granted that being a citizen of a republic entails specific rights, entitlements, and duties, which are proliferated and developed in the course of time. In that sense, the members of the Armenian community perceive themselves first and foremost as Turkish citizens of Armenian origin, a perception which reflects a certain sense of both integration and resentment. Recent developments indicate that Armenians living in Turkey want to reassert themselves in the public and political spheres and be able to be both Armenians and citizens.

The role of Turkey's Christian religious minorities in contributing to the secular and citizenship discourse has largely been ignored due to several reasons. Firstly, during the Republican period proper, the secular character of the Turkish state was a matter of no compromise. Hence even the voices of Muslims, let alone Christian minorities were seldom heard. Another problem hindering Christians from participating in the discourse was the nature of laicism and its strict application in Turkey. At the same time, there are ever-increasing popular and vernacular demands for participation in the state-consolidation and pluralisation process, and the vast majority of them come from a religious background. In the case of citizenship, suffice it to say that the Turkish version of national enclosure has framed a paradigm of hegemonic cultural identity and maximum homogeneity built through a variety of methods ranging from overt exclusion to isolation, marginalization, assimilation and annihilation of particular identities and loyalties.<sup>3</sup>

Recently, much has been written on identity and citizenship questions and my intention is not to reiterate them. I rather intend to clarify the aim of the AK Party in constructing a new republican citizen devoid of former prejudices, and

to explore in a more deliberate way the role that the AK Party designated to the Armenian community in construction of its political agenda.

### **The Emergence of Reconsidered Republican Identities**

The AK Party, founded in 2001, is a political party striving to represent a new identity in the Turkish political landscape. It was taken for granted that the AK Party, by representing the periphery of politics, was devoid of previous elitist constraints and characteristics; instead it incorporated a non-conventional approach to identity long desired by the citizens of Turkey. In a word, the AK Party's formulas set a fertile ground for generating hope among different identities in Turkey. Turkish society's initial endorsement of the AK Party as an alternative to formerly dominant political forces gained momentum prior to the elections in 2002. Although the AK Party can by no means be perceived as a monolithic party, its identity and legitimacy were both largely anchored on pro-Western, pro-globalization, pro-democratic, pro-liberal and all-inclusive definitions. With a secure majority in the Parliament, the leader of the party and PM Recep Tayyip Erdoğan undertook reforms in almost every problematic field that affected the status of an EU accession candidate country (the Kurdish issue, human rights, civil-military relations, minority issues, Cyprus disputes, etc). More importantly, the AK Party's ideological shift away from the "*Milli Görüş*" towards a conservative democratic ideological orientation and its endorsement of the notion of "social diversity" put the party firmly "against the uniform vision of the republican establishment."<sup>4</sup> The EU membership perspective of the AK Party had slowly persuaded the military and the bureaucracy of the importance of conducting substantial reforms, although neither the military nor the bureaucracy ever abandoned their constant vigilance against the "black Turks."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, every step taken by the AK Party in the direction of widening religious freedom was interpreted by the Kemalist elite as a proof of its concealed agenda to undermine the principles of laicism.<sup>6</sup> As İhsan Dağı asserts, "the fact that a political party that enjoys the support of nearly one-half of all voters in Turkey sees human rights as fundamental to its very survival is indicative both of its insecurity and the social and political strength of a human rights discourse."<sup>7</sup> Insecurity has in fact been the Achilles' heel of the AK Party.<sup>8</sup> This symptomatic description helps us to comprehend how the party's security perceptions designated the accents of its program. Despite its two consecutive victories in the general and municipal elections (in 2002 and 2004), the AK Party failed to hide or overcome the vulnerability syndrome. As a result, the insecurity factor came to undermine the AK Party's radical-reformist stance. Thus, from the very outset, it was obvious that the AK Party would face clear limitations

The Armenian community, just like the other minorities in Turkey, has experienced decades of ignorance, prejudice and intimidation without being able to speak up in its defense

from certain Kemalist circles (the army, opposition parties, the judicial system, law enforcement, the universities, etc.); hence, it would have difficulties in providing security guarantees to those who needed them most.

Since 2002, Turkey has undergone a very impressive process of transformation by speeding from one reform to another, a situation which was mainly driven by external factors. In spite of some obvious shortcomings of the reforms in terms of their implementation, the reforms and the EU harmonization drive did manage to establish a climate of change. Moreover, the AK Party wanted others to contribute to that change. However, the processes to follow proved that Turkish society's dominant enthusiasm needed to be treated with the utmost care, simply because being a strong party has proved to be an insufficient force to carry out extensive reforms.

The Armenian community, just like the other minorities in Turkey, has experienced decades of ignorance, prejudice and intimidation without being able to speak up in its defense. Repressive measures, such as restrictions with respect to their autonomy and the property rights of their foundations in the 1920s and 1930s, special taxes in the 1940s, pogroms in the 1950s and 1960s, the seizure of the property of congregational foundations in the 1970s, and restrictions on admitting children to minority schools have all been effects of the republic's policy towards its minorities, resulting in a steady decrease in their numbers together with those of their schools, churches and foundations.<sup>9</sup> The Armenian community in Turkey in this period was characterized by its fearful existence and collective silence.

For the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the question of Turkey's Armenian community has been considered both as a minority issue and as a state security concern.<sup>10</sup> It was never taken into serious consideration as an identity question. There are several reasons to explain that, as prejudiced interpretations of the Lausanne Treaty's (1923) clauses, and the principles and essential ideological features of Kemalism created the very framework which shaped the worldview of the citizens residing in the country and Armenians among them. With the passage of time and with the application of the rigid forms of laicism, the Armenians' religious and ethnic identity was put into serious jeopardy. The Armenians, along with other non-Muslim communities, had long been treated as "local foreigners with Turkish citizenship."<sup>11</sup> Even today, Turkey's bureaucracy continues to be

guided by a strongly nationalist, unitary concept of society, thereby denying and neglecting the existence of ethnic or religious identities.

Under the provisions of the Treaty of Lausanne, Armenians in Turkey are not seen as an ethnic minority but rather as a religious, i.e., non-Muslim, minority. Their minority rights therefore mainly encompass the maintenance of the Armenian language to the extent that it is part of the Armenian Apostolic or Uniate Armenian rites.<sup>12</sup> The Church and private Armenian schools thus represent the most important institutions for preserving Armenian identity. For that and other relevant issues to be properly handled the Armenian community first and foremost needs to be acknowledged as such. In other words, it is a vain hope to expect a Christian (religious) community to be active and cooperative in a rigidly applied laicist system. It is anathema to the Turkish Constitution and to the logics of the Turkish politics.

In spite of the promising start in 2002, the EU harmonization process in Turkey has been progressing rather slowly due to a number of reasons. Specifically, those reforms which were supposed to make the lives of Turkey's minorities much better (congregational foundations, property issues, status of the churches and synagogues) suffered from the well-intentioned actions of small and medium bureaucrats, judiciaries, etc. and as a result have had limited effect. Many more issues remain unaddressed and were not even included in the reform projects. Moreover, the process of granting certain rights to the religious minorities did not come along with proper and democratic legal provisions in the jurisprudence. Thus, in many cases the bureaucrats were given the final word in solving important property and foundation related issues. The slow withdrawal of the state has been accompanied by increasing unease and reluctance on the part of the Turkish bureaucracy to lose its hold on society. Thus, a set of institutions have continued to function in Turkey with ultra-conservative attitudes toward sensitive matters (secular education, religious services and minorities' estates, etc.) – for example the Directorate of Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Education and the Directorate General of Foundations and the Higher Council of Minorities (before 2004).

### **Contextualisation of the Minorities**

From 2002 onwards a few distinctive measures were taken to improve the situation. The improvements were also acknowledged in the EU Enlargement Reports. In this paper those achievements will not be elaborated upon in detail; instead we aim to determine what necessary measures are still missing and what remains to be done. On September 22, 2003, the Christian minorities of Turkey sent a joint

letter to the Human Rights Committee of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (TBMM) in which they called upon the state to grant “... *first and foremost recognition of the legal personality of all Christian patriarchates and churches and the removal of all legal obstacles to such recognition...*”<sup>13</sup> In the same vein, the Political Bureau of the Foreign Ministry’s Secretariat General for the European Union asked academic jurists to make recommendations for the reorganization of the religious bureaucracy. As a result, Professor Hüseyin Hatemi, from the Faculty of Law of İstanbul University, drafted a bill that foresaw the granting of the status of “body corporate” to indigenous non-Muslim communities such as the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, the Armenian Orthodox Patriarchate, the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate and the Rabbinate. The new corporate bodies were supposed to be supervised by a new Ministry of Religious Affairs, which was to be in charge of two Directorates of Religious Affairs, one for Sunnism and one for Shi’ism, which would serve as a framework for integrating the Alevi communities.<sup>14</sup> However, due to various reasons, little has been done to meet these recommendations and suggestions.

As the dominant policy parameters of the AK Party are delineated, it is appropriate to address the following question: what were the prime identity aspirations of the AK Party and where was the Armenian community situated in that framework? First and foremost, they both shared the identity of being oppressed and being constrained by limitations. The AK Party used this image very wisely and strived to grant a shelter to those who had identical perceptions. The AK Party’s inclusive identity gave initial assurances to the Armenians who needed a sustainable Turkish state as much as the rest of the reform-minded citizens of Turkey. The AK Party strived to base its identity not on citizenship-duty-bound and national uniformity perceptions, but rather on individual perceptions. But the AK Party leaders came to acknowledge that frontal confrontation with the Kemalist elite based on the *Milli Görüş*’s previous anti-Western, anti-system rhetoric and relying upon religious symbols seemed irritating for the Kemalists, and hence, could not assure a prospective future in politics. According to Metin Heper, Erdoğan believes in the potential of Islam to unite people around an ideal and build morality, integrity and drive.” He believes in a kind of Islamic version of the Protestant work ethic, where you work hard for the benefit of the country because it is a good and right thing according to Islam”.<sup>15</sup> The AK Party’s political stance resembled the fundamentally revised and innovated adaptation of the conservative political thought which has dominated most of the republican history of Turkey.

Another important dimension that the AK Party was successful in promoting was to capitalize on the idea of an ideological coalition of reform-oriented people. Before the elections, the party managed to build a wide coalition of different

forces and extended a hand of cooperation to the Armenian, Greek and Jewish communities. However, in order to grasp the nature of that cooperation it is appropriate to state that when speaking of AK Party's efforts to woo the Armenians I don't mean building an election coalition. The Armenians' share in the elections did not exceed 30,000 to 35,000

voters, hence, it is obvious that the AK Party was more interested in constructing a symbolic alliance with marginalized communities. Moreover, the AK Party made it clear that it would be a party where religious people feel at home, but it wouldn't be a religious party. In that sense it was interesting to observe during my interview with the late Hrant Dink, when he mentioned the little known fact that in the 2002 November pre-election campaign Erdoğan invited him and a few other prominent Armenian intellectuals, to participate in the elections on the AK Party ticket. The offer was kindly declined by Dink on the grounds that their respective jobs have important missions to carry out. Nevertheless, the three agreed to cooperate very closely in the coming years.<sup>16</sup> However, a few activists and prominent members of the Armenian community in İstanbul did choose to join the AK Party.

In the 2002 November pre-election campaign Erdoğan invited Hrant Dink and a few other prominent Armenian intellectuals to participate in the elections on the AK Party ticket

### Concerns and Expectations

What expectations and concerns did the Armenian community have about the AK Party? Although PM Erdoğan has continuously stated that the Armenians living in İstanbul do not face any problems, on different occasions the AK party has acknowledged that there is a long way to go in gaining the complete trust of the Armenian community. As skilled workers, craftspeople and independent entrepreneurs, Armenians belong to Turkey's urban middle classes, and enjoy a certain "petty-bourgeois" lifestyle. Due to both open and covert discrimination, however, they are scarcely represented in public service positions. No more than one to two percent of Armenians is a member of a political party or actively participates in politics.<sup>17</sup> According to statistical data, most Armenians in Turkey live in İstanbul, while a tiny minority lives in Ankara and in the southeast of Turkey. Hence, while talking about the Armenian community we are essentially talking about the Istanbul Armenians or Bolsahays, as they call themselves (Polsahay in Eastern Armenian.)

First of all, the majority of the Armenian community still feels the lack of sufficient security in their daily affairs, a feeling which became even stronger after Hrant Dink's assassination. Each time there is an open outbreak of visible unrest

between Turkey and Armenia, France, or the USA, the Armenian community finds itself in a condition of high anxiety. In such situations Turkish Armenians become the defenseless targets of Turkish nationalists' acts of retaliation, an ongoing smear, disinformation and hate campaign which ultimately leads to an increase in discrimination. In this climate, any Turkish administrations that have dared even to consider, rather than neglect, these issues, have been largely endorsed by the Armenians. The Armenian community in Turkey is working very hard to overcome the physiological barrier of past injustices. Nevertheless, a sense of fear and vulnerability still largely prevails among some members (especially intellectuals, entrepreneurs, artists and activists) of the Armenian community. Another important challenge is that despite the small size and enormous contributions made by the Armenians to the Ottoman Empire, their historical role and political potential is not appropriately recognized, which makes present-day Armenians feel underprivileged and segregated.

As history is of vital importance in making any judgments about Turkey it is worth mentioning the attitude of the Turkish Armenian community towards the Genocide discourse. In brief, Turkey's Armenian community has quite a different strategy (if any) in pursuing the course of the recognition of the Armenian Genocide. For instance, when there is a public debate concerning the course and the strategy of the recognition of the Armenian Genocide there are at least three perspectives in play – a) the official standpoint of the Armenian Government, which believes that recognition of the Genocide by Turkey should not be a precondition for normalizing interstate relations, b) the dispersed and heterogeneous Armenian Diaspora, which aspires for worldwide condemnation of Turkey, severe diplomatic, trade and other kinds of sanctions, and the exertion of optimum pressure on Ankara, and c) extreme caution among the Armenian community in İstanbul when discussing “the events of the WWI,” because any steps taken by individual activists without the consent and the approval of the Armenian community might lead to unforeseen developments, which in their turn might endanger the security of the Armenian community. That is why some activists from the community want the Republic of Armenia and particularly the Diaspora to be vigilant and to take their position into watchful consideration, because they are the closest and prime target of any negative implications. In perspective, however, the Armenians in Turkey are better positioned to play the role of a bridge or a mediator between Yerevan, Ankara and the Diaspora, and hence they are the ones who demand more clarity in that question.

In addition to the widely known difficulties in the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement process, there is also a problem of communication between Armenia



and the Turkish Armenian community. In this sense, it is appropriate to cite a prominent Armenian intellectual (who asked to remain anonymous) who cautioned me to treat Turkey's Armenians separately and never juxtapose the Armenian community with the Greek and Jewish ones. His clarification sounded quite acceptable – “unlike Greece and Israel we (Armenia - VTM) don't have diplomatic relations with Turkey. If there is a need to press on the Turkish Government to resolve issues related to the Greeks and Jews it is rather easier to discuss the questions on the state-diplomatic level. Meanwhile the lack of diplomatic relations makes Armenia a mere observer.”<sup>18</sup>

In general, for a researcher, the Armenian community's interactions with Turkish state institutions may seem more than peculiar. For instance, above the administrative buildings of the Armenian schools and churches the Turkish flag is waving; in the corridors and classrooms, busts and pictures of Atatürk are commonplace along with many of his famous sayings. In Armenian schools, required subjects are taught in Turkish, and except for classes that teach the Armenian language and religion, there are no lessons on Armenian history and culture. Hrant Dink wrote many columns about the state of the Armenian schools in Turkey, and took special interest in their administration. While criticizing his own community for its shortcomings, he also berated the Turkish government for imposing numerous administrative restrictions on Armenian (and other minority) schools. The Armenian community was encouraged by Hrant Dink's ability to provide public, constructive criticism to the government.

The atmosphere changed quite dramatically after Hrant Dink's assassination. The cautious optimism of the Armenian community was seriously shattered. In the words of Pakrat Estukyan, Editor of *Agos*, an atmosphere of despondency held sway over the Armenian community, which started to suffer from a certain type of malaise.<sup>19</sup> Questions of vulnerability and serious security risks came to the surface. Although PM Erdoğan paid a hasty visit to Dink's family and gave the highest assurances that he would do his best to ensure stability and grant security guarantees to the Armenian community, the security risks increased and there were even voices of support for the perpetrators and a disturbing increase in anti-Armenian discourse among some ultranationalist circles. AK Party officials were quick to condemn those trends, but in some cases the condemnation did not go beyond lip service. On occasions the AK Party was associated with the label of

The atmosphere changed quite dramatically after Hrant Dink's assassination. The cautious optimism of the Armenian community was seriously shattered

being passive. The deaths of Christian priests and servants by ultra-nationalist Turks in 2007 escalated concerns among the members of the Armenian community. Furthermore, the process of the trial of Hrant Dink's assassins also raised a series of profound questions with respect to the authenticity of support for the Armenian community among some AK Party officials.

The assassination opened a new page in relations between the AK Party and the Armenian community. To a certain extent it was a setback. Hrant Dink's death galvanized certain ideas which he had made public when alive. It is widely known that some of his ideas were not particularly embraced by some circles of the Armenian community. Dink had alternative conciliatory solutions to the problem of the Genocide and cohabitation of the two nations.<sup>20</sup> When he made public the argument that Armenians all around the world should overwhelmingly support Turkey's bid for EU membership, it caused uproar among the Armenians, simply because before that it was unimaginable to picture Turkey among the EU member states without acknowledging the fact of the Genocide. Hrant Dink's perspective was very pragmatic on that issue – “we need to help Turkey to achieve its goal because it will be much easier to discuss thorny issues then rather than now, when Turkey is widely viewed as excluded from EU trends. It is unimaginable to expect recognition of the Genocide until the Turkish state has been granted a secure pathway to the EU community.”<sup>21</sup> By that time, the general feeling among Armenians was that under no circumstances should Turkey be allowed into the EU. So to put it mildly, Hrant Dink's alternative vision was a surprise. Yet first and foremost, his novel vision caught even the attention of the Armenian community in İstanbul, which started to grasp the real meaning of Hrant Dink's aims and largely backed him.

Recently, Armenians in the community have become more vocal in their concerns about the genuine character of the AK Party's initiatives. On different occasions, Armenians have voiced their concerns in the hope that the members of the ruling party would assist in their resolution. The problems facing Turkey's Armenians have multiple sources and characteristics (education, school enrollment, foundations, cultural, social, familial and language preservation issues), hence, their treatment also must derive from multiple sources.

### **Voting Preferences and Motivations**

According to different post-election public opinion polls, around sixteen percent who supported the AK Party in 2002 stated that the primary reason they voted for the party was its promise to solve sensitive issues.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, during the republican decades a set of fundamental issues emerged, and the vast majority of



Photo: AA, Levent Harman

*The successful completion of the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement process will enhance the profile of the Armenian community and the latter will substantially benefit from that progression.*

them remained unresolved. Moreover, in the 1980s and 1990s, issues that were once merely sensitive (Kurdish nationalism, human rights, headscarf disputes, minority rights, financial crises, etc.) became even stronger to the extent that those governments failed to tackle them effectively and had to hand over power to those who claimed to possess more competent policy plans. The vicious circle seemed endless, and any party with a good reputation and authentic devotion to the cause could gain the support of the constituency. Suffice it to look back at the turn of the 20th century – a failed party system, a weak or absent opposition, a demoralized economy, a heightened level of political apathy, etc.<sup>23</sup> The AK Party leadership made it clear to the constituency that despite the existing difficulties their one-year-old party was determined to eliminate the chronic problems of the Turkish state.

The official election results will not help to determine the exact voting preferences of Turkey's Armenians. However, the data from two densely populated Armenian neighborhoods of İstanbul (Şişli and Bakırköy) and my fieldwork data indicate that in both the 2002 and 2007 elections, the Armenian community demonstrated political sympathy towards the AK Party and for those CHP and independent candidates who held favorable views in regard to Armenians. The left-wing socialist ÖDP (Özgürlük ve Dayanışma Partisi) led by Ufuk Uras

also received votes from the Armenians. The survey by the İstanbul-based *Nor Zartonk* organization, whose name means “Being minority in Turkey,” indicates that from 2002 until 2007 a distinct form of voting transformation took place. The pre-election surveys of the July 22, 2007 elections indicated that the Armenians were ready to increase their support to the AK Party by 100% compared to the 2002 performance. On the contrary, the CHP was about to receive only 13% percent of Armenian votes compared to the 35.6% of the 2002 elections. The ÖDP also decreased its votes from 8% in 2002 to 4.6% in 2007.<sup>24</sup> The independent candidate Baskın Oran, who was nominated in the Şişli district, received 8.7 percent of votes in the elections of July 22, 2007 and failed to get elected. Thus, the election results generally reflected the Armenians’ pre-election voting preferences. A comparison of the results of the 2002 and 2007 elections reveal that there was initial caution towards the AK Party, which slowly faded away and with the passage of time Armenians gained more confidence in the ruling political party. The reasons for the Armenian community’s electoral preferences were multiple. The general perception available at the time of the field research in İstanbul was that, parallel to the concerns of the secular-Kemalist elite, the Armenians also had been extremely worried about the rise of movements with Islamic worldviews. That perception was easily understandable because the picture presented by the secular elite before the 2002 elections (and before the 1995 and 1999 elections as well) was that Turkey was on the brink of a major choice between Islamists and secularists. According to the unconditional devotees of the secular pathway the Turkish constituency needed to make a wise, black-and-white choice between those forces which strive to heal society’s wounds and those that bring more ambiguity to the atmosphere. There was a cacophany of mutual accusation among the secular and pro-Islamic political forces. One can only imagine the general feeling of anxiety about how to behave in the elections, whom to vote for, etc.

The data collected by Komşuoğlu indicates that Armenians’ voting percentage was by far greater than Turkey’s overall balloting percentage - 79.1 percent in the 2002 general elections.<sup>25</sup> More importantly that figure was set to stay stable in the 2007 elections also, as indicated in the “*Nor Zartonk* survey,” which showed 80% of indented participation.<sup>26</sup> These figures are interesting because the 2002 elections were widely known for a low turn-out. There could be various reasons for the Armenians’ active participation; however, we would like to emphasize the connection between the vocal participation of the Armenian community and the contribution made by the Armenian periodicals, particularly of *Agos*. Hrant Dink, thanks to his critical standing directed both against the Turkish state and the Armenian community, wanted the latter to transform its neutral identity

into one of prominence. That was not an easy process, but Dink managed to make Armenians rethink their previous standing on vital political matters. This intention, as a matter of fact, coincided with the desire of the newly founded AK Party to establish a broad-based coalition of different identities. A paradigm of shared interests emerged, which worked relatively well until Dink's assassination.

The Armenian individuals who supported the AK Party stated that this party had a more positive approach towards the problems of the community when compared with previous governments, and they also drew a connection between the Islamist identity of the party and its anticipated respect for their own religion. In their words they shared the statement that: "... as they (the AK Party-VTM) are religious people they will also respect our religion."<sup>27</sup> Another respondent said "I'm a Christian, but I'm not scared of the AK Party. They are working for the good of the country; they are respecting other cultures and accepting the rules of the EU."<sup>28</sup> It should be mentioned that this mode of positive approach needs to be considered with care, because the Armenian community along with other members of the Turkish society shared a prevailing enthusiasm after the AK Party came to power. As a proof of that statement, when the Armenians were asked about their opinion on the question of the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) they preferred to begin with their positive statements about the AK Party. This general enthusiasm was so prevalent that Armenians did not recall those instances when the WP mayors or deputies initiated or gave numerous permissions to ruin Armenian churches or transform them into mosques. For instance, on June 13, 1997, *Hürriyet* reported that the WP mayor of Beyoğlu allowed the historic Protestant Armenian church of Çiksalın to be destroyed entirely. The church had been expropriated a year and a half before that in order to build a health centre on the site.<sup>29</sup> There were other identical cases of destroying Armenian historical monuments by the WP in the Eastern part of the country.

Certain circles in the Armenian community interpreted the success of the AK Party in the 2002 elections largely based upon the perception that "... there was no other reasonable choice; in addition, the AK Party has been underlining the EU vision and it did manage the EU relations well at that time."<sup>30</sup> It was also apparent for the Armenian community that the AK Party had distanced itself from the Kemalist/ nationalist perspective when it first came to power, while the CHP

The AK Party had distanced itself from the Kemalist/ nationalist perspective when it first came to power, while the CHP had turned more and more aggressively nationalist. Therefore, the Armenians felt more comfortable voting for the AK Party

(*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (CHP) – Republican People’s Party) had turned more and more aggressively nationalist. Therefore, the Armenians felt more comfortable voting for the AK Party.<sup>31</sup>

In terms of cooperation between the AK Party and the Armenian community, the last parliamentary elections in July 2007 revealed some remarkable developments. During the last elections the AK Party used the leverage of the new Law of Foundations, which had previously created considerable problems for the religious minorities. The Armenian community’s response was less than positive: the AK Party “used the process of changing the law, yet we witness that the new law is not capable of solving the problems associated with the foundations. Many Armenians voted both for the AK Party and for independent candidates like Baskın Oran, Ufuk Uras, Sabahat Tunçel on different grounds. Most probably the ones who decided to vote for independent candidates took into account that the EU process stopped, Hrant was killed, and that many who were in the government knew about the murder before it took place. Nationalism was rising.”<sup>32</sup>

The last parliamentary elections of 2007 were also known for divided opinions among the members of the Armenian community. *Agos*, the Armenian weekly, estimated that close to 60 percent of Turkey’s Armenians would vote for the AK Party.<sup>33</sup> Some Armenians noted that the fact that some social democrats and leftist parties nominated right wing and racist candidates caused many members of the community to think that another term for the AK Party might not be such a bad thing after all. Prior to the elections Patriarch Mesrob II Mutafyan stated that “The AK Party is more moderate and less nationalistic in its dealings with minorities. The Erdoğan government listens to us; we will vote for the AK Party in the next elections.”<sup>34</sup> Vasken Barın, deputy mayor of İstanbul’s central district, Şişli, and a member of the CHP, said that this was only the Patriarch’s personal opinion. And even the Patriarch’s press spokesman, Luiz Bakar, said that Mesrop Mutafyan’s statement was his personal opinion, and noted that the Patriarch could not provide political leadership to the community. He added that everyone was free to vote as they liked.<sup>35</sup> Thus, there were concerns about the actual role of the Patriarch in dealing with important community problems, and the Armenians did not follow the words of the Patriarch in unison. Nonetheless, it was unusual for the Patriarch to openly endorse a party running for Parliament. It indicates the level of trust that the Patriarch had towards the AK Party. In any account, the representatives of community largely welcomed the AK Party’s successes in the election.<sup>36</sup>

The anti-Armenian intentions of the CHP and the MHP (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* – MHP, Nationalist Action Party) for the most part of the republican period

were fresh in the memories of the Armenians; therefore, in general they tried to keep a distance from those parties. However, during the 1990s and 2000s, the CHP tried to transform its anti-Armenian views, and the mayor of Şişli, Mustafa Sarıgül from the CHP, was elected in 1999. Sarıgül, prominent member of the CHP, invested a lot to set a common ground for cooperation with the Armenians. Furthermore, Sarıgül appointed the above-mentioned Barın as his Deputy when he came to power in 1999. After Sarıgül was re-elected in 2004, he kept Barın as his Deputy and made him a member of the Şişli Municipality Assembly.

### Continuity and Change

The results of the two elections revealed institutionalized predicaments hindering the Armenian community and the AK Party from working more efficiently together. Other no less capable causes were the lack of *modus operandi*, lack of systematization, lack of routines and coordination between different state agencies and bureaucratic circles as well as lack of motivation. Simultaneously there were too many responsibilities and promises.

There are other indications to state that the elections (in 2002 and 2007) triggered certain changes in the perceptions of the Armenian community in regard to its political and societal participation profiles. Those indications pointed to the need for critical political and social reconsideration. Dr. Kentel's words have come to substantiate that increasing need. He states that the Armenian community "wants to be the same as its Turkish counterpart, have the same status in society and exercise the same expectations as everyone else in the mainstream." He continues "Armenians feel that their political worlds must go beyond partaking in community organizations, church and choir and alumni associations, reading *Agos*, etc."<sup>37</sup>

In the wake of the 2002 elections, the AK Party's haste to deal with the reform packages was juxtaposed with considerable external pressure. The Accession Partnership Document of 2003 stated clearly that Turkish authorities needed "to establish better conditions for the functioning of religious communities, their members and their assets, the teaching, appointing and training of clergy, and the enjoyment of property rights in line Protocol 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights."<sup>38</sup> The same concerns were present in the last progress report made public on November 6, 2007.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the report stressed that the government was not persistent enough to prevent the increasing attacks and individual crimes against non-Muslim citizens and their places of worship. This concern was reflected in a circular on the freedom of religion of non-Muslim Turkish citizens issued by the Ministry of Interior on June 19, 2007.<sup>40</sup> The report further

elaborated the fact that religious groups continued to face problems such as lack of legal personality, restricted property rights, problems with the management of their foundations and with recovering property by judicial means.<sup>41</sup> Turkey also fails to cooperate closely with the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), and has not signed the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities or the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. As regards to the last charter, Turkish authorities have repeatedly stated that “the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages” opposes Articles 3 and 42 of the Turkish Constitution, which regulates the status of the Turkish language and the provision that only Turkish can be taught in educational institutions.<sup>42</sup>

The Armenian community is struggling hard to preserve its inherited values, resources and assets. However, the history of the republican decades has proved that without governmental assistance the Armenian religious community is not capable of doing much. It certainly requires the heavy hand of a strong state to solve its problems rather than face new ones. One of the possible solutions for making the lives of the Armenian communities better is to use the advantages of the new laws, which were adopted as part of the EU harmonization packages. For instance, the revised laws on associations, assembly and demonstration and the Council on Minority Affairs can be a fertile ground for reaching out and making Turkish society at large aware of minority concerns and expectations. The international community and those which signed the Lausanne Treaty need to be assertively engaged with a clear mission to help the Armenian community improve its legal status and be a part of the larger social and political mosaic that the West urges Turkey to have.

The relationship between the AK Party and the Armenian community has revealed that in matters of necessity the Armenian community can act in partial unison and if necessary act consistently. It just needs attention and stimulus to be encouraged and be active as a part of Turkish society, as the emerging peripheral forces of Turkey are all striving to be. Corollary to that, some suggest to strengthen the Armenian identity through multiple channels and routines. Nowadays, there are voices in Turkey that argue for the worldwide movement of a politics of difference. But the latter, which is seen as a potent force in mobilizing members of groups that feel socially, culturally and politically marginalized by mainstream society,<sup>43</sup> is possible only if there is both a legal framework and the necessary socio-political surrounding to make their demands heard. Some observers claim that consciousness raising and group solidarity are important requirements to conduct political



action,<sup>44</sup> a statement which, although applicable in other instances, is more than imperfect for the Turkish case in general and for the Armenian case in particular. Rather, interculturalism, as a neutral description of a process that is inherent in multiethnic, multi-confessional and democratic societies, could inform a new kind of politics of alliance where differences are acknowledged as important and vital to one's own social and political experience and identity, even as empathy and connections to other are formed.<sup>45</sup> This summation by Lehigh is by no means an innovation in Turkey as many people and high-ranking politicians share the view of having an authentic pluralist society where everybody's voice should be heard and respected.

It is safe to claim that between 2002 and 2007 there were a period of melt-down between the Armenian community in Turkey and the ruling AK Party. Armenians in general hoped for security assurances from the AK Party and sought to benefit from radical systemic reforms. In turn, the AK Party strived to build a wide coalition of peripheral forces and movements in order to substantiate its reform-oriented agenda. In a word, it was a period of interest convergence. In this paper I have tried to give a systematic shape to the existing discourse revolving around the policy of the AK Party toward one dimension of the minority politics. Starting from 2002 there was a slowly growing trust between the AK Party and the Armenian community, which was based on shared interests and ambitions. The AK Party's drive to engage the Armenian community in its large-scale reformation context was unprecedented, despite the contradictory and limited results. But even if the AK Party possessed the necessary leverage to solve the problems, there were more elitist, Kemalist hindrances than intra-party reactions.<sup>46</sup> This is not to suggest that the AK Party had no problems with the Armenians; the majority of the problems did exist but it was important that the AK Party was willing at least to include the concerned Armenian voices.

The AK Party is still widely hailed as a party of "sensitive issues." Hence, nowadays the AK Party is positioned to embrace manageable challenges. In the aftermath of ideological and political confrontation the AK Party still holds power with a hope to generate greater confidence and determination. The AK Party's emphasis on interplay with different identities is absolutely crucial to overcoming

Armenians in general hoped for security assurances from the AK Party and sought to benefit from radical systemic reforms. In turn, the AK Party strived to build a wide coalition of peripheral forces and movements in order to substantiate its reform-oriented agenda

the psychological barriers on the different levels of state bureaucracy. The successful completion of the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement process will enhance the profile of the Armenian community and the latter will substantially benefit from that progression.

## Endnotes

1. Tessa Hofmann, *Armenians in Turkey Today: A Critical Assessment of the Situation of the Armenian Minority in the Turkish Republic* (The EU Office of Armenian Associations of Europe, Belgium, October 2002).

2. Ahmet İçduygu and Özlem Kaygusuz, "The Politics of Citizenship by Drawing Borders: Foreign Policy and the Construction of National Citizenship Identity in Turkey," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 6 (2004), p. 27.

3. Ibid 29.

4. Ali Soner, "The Justice and Development Party's policies towards non-Muslim minorities in Turkey," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2010), pp. 24-25.

5. Hakan Yavuz describes the Kemalists' self-perception as "white Turks" and Islamists' and peripheral forces' as "black Turks." Hakan Yavuz, "Cleansing Islam from the Public Sphere," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 54, No. 1, (2000); Hakan Yavuz, "Turkey's Fault Lines and the Crisis of Kemalism," *Current History*, Vol. 99, No. 633, (2000).

6. Gabriel Goltz, "The non-Muslim Minorities and Reform in Turkey," Hans-Lukas Kieser (ed.), *Turkey beyond Nationalism: Towards Post-nationalist Identities*, (London and New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2006), p. 181.

7. İhsan Dağı, "Justice and Development Party: Identity, Politics, and Human Rights Discourse in the Search for Security and legitimacy," Hakan Yavuz (ed.), *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Democracy and the AK Party* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2006), p. 103.

8. Ibid 89.

9. Goltz, "The non-Muslim Minorities and Reform in Turkey," p. 179.

10. Soner, "The Justice and Development Party's Policies towards non-Muslim Minorities in Turkey," p. 27.

11. Goltz, "The non-Muslim Minorities and Reform in Turkey," p. 175.

12. Hoffman, "Armenians in Turkey Today," p. 23.

13. Günter Seufert, "Religion: Nation-building Instrument of the State or Factor of Civil Society? The AK Party between state- and society-centered religious politics," Hans-Lukas Kieser (ed.), *Turkey beyond Nationalism: Towards Post-nationalist Identities*, ed., (London and New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2006 ), p. 145.

14. Ibid 146.

15. Deborah Sontag, "The Erdoğan Experiment," *The New York Times*, May 11, 2003.

16. Interview with Hrant Dink, İstanbul, August 20, 2004.

17. Markar Esayan, "Do not let citizenship remain on paper," <http://www.norzartonk.org/en/?p=10>; "Türkiyede Azınlık Olmak" Anketi Sonuçları, <http://www.norzartonk.org/en/?p=33>, p. 29.

18. Interview with an Armenian intellectual, İstanbul, May 5, 2005.

19. "The Armenian community of Istanbul: Confronting new challenges and old realities," interview with Pakrat Estukyan, <http://www.norzartonk.org/en/?p=77>.

20. "Hrant Dink and the Culprits of His Murder", *Turkish Daily News*, January 25, 2007.
21. Interview with Hrant Dink, İstanbul, August 2004.
22. Sultan Tepe, "A Pro-Islamic Party? Promises and Limits of Turkey's Justice and Development Party," Hakan Yavuz (ed.), *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Democracy and the AK Party*, (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2006), p. 123.
23. Tepe, "A Pro-Islamic party", p. 114.
24. "Türkiyede Azınlık Olmak" Anketi Sonuçları, <http://www.norzar-tonk.org/en/?p=33>, pp. 24-25.
25. Ayşegül Komsuoğlu, "Findings of a Field Survey on Turkey's Armenians: Notes on Their Political Profile." in *Groups, Ideologies and Discourses: Glimpses of the Turkish Speaking World* ed. Christoph Herzog Barbara (Würzburg: Ergon verlag würzburg in kommission, Pusch Istanbul texte und studien, Herausgegeben vom orient-institut, İstanbul, Vol. 10, 2008), p. 53.
26. Ibid 55.
27. Esayan, <http://www.norzar-tonk.org/en/?p=10>.
28. Yigal Schleifer, "Turkey: Religious Minorities Watch Closely as Election Day Approaches," <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav071907a.shtml>
29. Hoffman, "Armenians in Turkey," p. 28.
30. Interview with an Armenian journalist, İstanbul, September 17, 2007.
31. Interview with a member of the Armenian community, İstanbul, September 20, 2007.
32. Interview with a member of the Armenian community, İstanbul, September 18, 2007.
33. Schleifer, "Religious Minorities Watch Closely as Election Day Approaches."
34. Schleifer, "Turkey Religious Minorities Watch Closely as Election Day Approaches,"; Cengiz Çandar, "Turkey's Christians like AK Party despite Islamist past," *Turkish Daily News*, June 21, 2007.
35. Vercihan Ziflioğlu, "Community support cannot be taken for granted, says Şişli's Armenian Deputy Mayor," *Turkish Daily News*, [www.turkishdailynews.com.tr/article.php?enewsid=76347](http://www.turkishdailynews.com.tr/article.php?enewsid=76347)
36. "The Armenian community is pleased with the election results," <http://www.armtown.com/news/am/pan/20070726/23097>.
37. Tamar Nalçı, "Nor Zartonk Survey discussed," <http://www.norzar-tonk.org/en/?p=14>.
38. Official Journal of the European Communities, L 145/44 EN, June 12, 2003.
39. Commission Staff Working Document, Turkey 2007 Progress Report, Commission of the European Communities accompanying the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council - Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2007-2008 Brussels, Nov. 6, 2007, sec(2007) 1436 {com(2007) 663 final}, pp. 11-24.
40. Ibid 16.
41. Ibid 17.
42. "Turkey Criticized for not Signing Charter on Minority Languages," *Today's Zaman*, June 23, 2010.
43. Gary Lehring, "Identity politics," Mary Hawkesworth and Maurice Kogan (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Government and Politics*, 2nd ed., (London and New York: Routledge, Vol. 1, 2004), p. 576.
44. Ibid 577.
45. Ibid 584.
46. It is also true that within the AK Party there were anti-Armenian nationalistic voices (like Cemil Çiçek), but those trends were primarily voiced in connection with the Genocide.