

# The CHP and the “Democratic Opening”: Reactions to AK Party’s Electoral Hegemony

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## ABSTRACT

*The Justice and Development Party (AK Party) government has initiated a number of democratic opening initiatives to tackle with the Kurdish question, the Alevi question, the Roma question, and the minorities question. This paper focuses on the reaction of the main opposition party, the Republican People’s Party (CHP) to the initiative. It seeks to explain the CHP’s reaction through the concept of “electoral hegemony”, which refers to a situation where one party becomes an uncontestable actor in the electoral process, which, while weakening the possibility of the opposition parties winning elections, also weakens the faith and trust of their supporters that these parties could govern Turkey through winning elections. It is argued that the CHP’s reaction to the democratic opening initiative is in fact directly related to its need to respond effectively to the electoral hegemony of the AK Party, and that it has developed its response through the concept of sovereignty which has always been integral to its historical identity as the main carrier of the state-centric Turkish modernity.*

In her article on what has come to be known as “the democratic opening initiative”, Ümit Cizre correctly suggested that “All Turkish governments have been historically presented with hard choices in launching democratization strategies; such attempts always risk shattering the existing balance of power which favors the political role of the military as the leading force of an establishment that may react to democratic reforms”.<sup>1</sup> Of course, the risk of “shattering the existing balance of power” in favor of the state-centric establishment increases immensely, and becomes more apparent and visible, if what is at stake is the Kurdish question which has been, without any doubt, *the* most troublesome problem in Turkey, involving simultaneously both a “politics of identity” demanding the recognition of the cultural rights and freedoms of the Kurds, and a “violent act of ethnic assertiveness” causing the deaths of more than 40,000 people. More-

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over, the Kurdish question has not only been the most troublesome problem in Turkey. It has also operated as a “constitutive of the recent transformation” of Turkish modernity and politics, as it has generated significant impacts on the state-government relations by shifting

the existing balance of power in politics in favor of the military and judiciary over elected governments, *politically* in the political debates in the parliament as well as *discursively* as security concerns are prioritized over democracy. It is in this sense that the Kurdish question has also become the obstacle to the consolidation and deepening of Turkish democracy.

In 2009, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AK Party) government initiated a number of democratic opening initiatives to tackle the Kurdish question, the Alevi question, the Roma question, and the minorities question. According to the AK Party government, the aim of the initiatives was to strengthen the social unity and cohesion of Turkey through democratic deliberation. Of course, among these initiatives, the one concerning the Kurdish question is the most difficult to achieve, insofar as it would require the following: a) a significant shift from the military solution based on the primary role and status of the security measures to a political solution through democratic deliberation; b) a suitable international environment involving strong and clear political and strategic support from key global actors, such as the United States, the EU, and Russia; c) growing domestic support from other political parties for the initiatives; and d) growing public support and popular consent coming from society.

The AK Party government has calculated that there was in fact a suitable international environment for the minimization of the violent ethnic assertiveness dimension of the Kurdish question, thereby creating a suitable environment to take of a number of significant political and constitutional steps forward to solve the question democratically. Backed by a permissive international environment, including strong support from global actors, the AK Party government assumed that it would gain public support and popular consent simply because the democratic opening initiative, designed to solve the Kurdish question, would simply mean the end of the unacceptable human misery caused by the decades-old low-intensity war between the Turkish military forces and the PKK terror organization that has been going on since the 1990s. This assumption has also involved an expectation by the government that the successful implementation of the initiative, with an increase in international and societal support, would force the opposition parties to

back, or at least to agree to participate in, the process of democratic deliberation, which would, in turn, give rise to the impression that the government and the opposition have reached a consensus over the democratic opening initiative.

Yet, such a consensus, which is in fact the key to conflict resolution especially in the cases where a conflict involves violence, was not achieved. The opposition parties, the Republican People’s Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) and the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP), have not given their consent to the initiative; on the contrary, they have strongly opposed it, claiming that the AK Party government, while assuming that the democratic opening initiative would strengthen social unity and cohesion, was increasing the risk of an ethnic-based disintegration and segregation in Turkey. As a result, despite the AK Party government’s constant reminders of its will to implement the democratic opening initiative, the process of implementation has significantly slowed down. It is in this context that the strong reaction of the CHP has been of significance, as it has been the barrier to the process and to a large extent managed to block it. As a “political actor” whose history goes back to the foundation of Turkey as an independent nation-state aiming at reaching the level of contemporary civilization through a political, economic and societal modernization process, and as a “political party” whose recent discourse and identity has been framed by its strong opposition to the AK Party government in the name of protecting the secular and territorial substance of the political community and the constitutional regime, the strong reaction of the CHP to the democratic opening initiative has been effective and powerful. It has presented the initiative to solve the Kurdish question as an (irresponsible) act by the government of transforming the constitutional regime<sup>2</sup> and of causing the ethnic disintegration of Turkish society. For the CHP, the democratic opening initiative would involve a serious risk of weakening the foundation of the secular constitutional regime and its territorial integrity, and precisely because of this, it has to be abandoned.

It should be pointed out in this context that even though the CHP’s strong reaction to the initiative has been put forward explicitly and openly, it has also created ambiguity and surprise. The ambiguity has occurred simply due to the fact that during the 1990s, the CHP was the only center party in Turkish politics attempting both ideologically and politically to enhance the possibility of solving the Kurdish question democratically. In the past, the party has also suggested that the military solution is not a solution at all and is instead a factor that accelerates and reinforces the problem.<sup>3</sup> In the 1990s, where the Kurdish question involved the low-intensity war between the Turkish military and the PKK, the CHP took a risky position of promoting democracy over security, political actors over state

elites, and the parliamentary domain over the state bureaucracy. Given the CHP's previous position, which can be read as the first democratic opening initiative prepared by a center party to solve the Kurdish question, why has the party radically changed its position on the Kurdish question and what has brought about a strong reaction to the AK Party government for its initiative? What are the reasons that would give rise to the radical transformation of the CHP in terms of the Kurdish question? In this article, I seek an answer to these questions. In doing so, I will rely on two concepts, namely those of "electoral hegemony" and "sovereignty as the decision on the exception", which, I argue, are of utmost importance in understanding the way in which the CHP has developed its strong, state-centric, and security-oriented reaction. In substantiating this argument, I will first analyze briefly the significance of the democratic opening initiative, and then elaborate on the CHP's strong reaction to it by focusing on these two concepts.

### **Contextualizing the Democratic Opening Initiative**

Since the 1990s and the end of the Cold War, there have emerged important debates on the questions of identity and citizenship. Contrary to the belief that the end the Cold War would give rise to a new world order, what has come to be known as "identity-based conflicts" have increased in a globalizing world, generating significant transformations in inter- and intra-national relations, and forcing us to search for viable and effective solutions to them. In other words, as the claims to identity and difference have begun to yield, not only democratic calls for multiculturalism and participatory democracy, but also the number of increasingly powerful ethnic- and religious-based nationalist and fundamentalist political movements increased. Considering that these groups are promoting essentialist and repressive societal visions, the need to take them seriously, analyze them critically, and develop effective responses to them has become extremely important, if not imperative, for the possibility of making the globalizing world more stable and peaceful. It is in this sense that the question of how to cope effectively with the claims to identity and difference and prevent their articulation into ethnic and religious-based nationalist and fundamentalist political movements has become one of the central concerns of both global and national politics, as well as.

Moreover, as a quick glance at the available answers and responses in academic and public debates on these conflicts indicates, two analytically separate stands have developed, one focusing exclusively on identity, the other on citizenship.<sup>4</sup> Thus, while some suggest that it is the investigation of the historical and discursive constructions of identity and its claims for the recognition of its difference that has to be taken into account as the main focus of the process of conflict

resolution, others have tended to situate their answers exclusively in the realm of citizenship and liberal rights. Yet, although these debates have provided us with important and useful accounts of the changing nature of modern societies, they have remained partial and limited. This is precisely because of the fact that while those focusing exclusively on the identity-dimension argument tend to ignore a crucial fact, which is that these claims are also demands for new citizenship rights; at the same time the debate on citizenship has focused exclusively on the principle of individual rights and freedoms and has tended to neglect the fact that identity-based conflicts and their democratic deliberation within the realm of citizenship requires an attempt to reconstruct our understanding of citizenship with an equal and multicultural constitutional citizenship as a way of creating unity within diversity, that is, a common language of “enlarged and equal rights, freedoms and responsibilities”, shared and voiced by all of the cultural identities with diverse cultural characteristics.

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To deal effectively with identity-based conflicts, there is therefore a need to link together these debates and responses in order to find an adequate answer to the question of how to recognize identity/difference claims in a way that their articulation into ethno-nationalism and religious fundamentalism can be prevented. In doing so, as has been suggested, we should stop responding to identity-based conflicts in the following ways: only through security-based measures; thinking that relying solely on economic development can resolve these conflicts; assuming that the principle of the protection of individual rights and freedoms would be enough to deal effectively with these conflicts; and coming to terms with the fact that claims for group rights and freedoms, embedded in identity/difference claims, are not necessarily contradictory to or have a damaging effect on individual rights and freedoms. On the contrary, group rights and freedoms can contribute to the development of individual rights and freedoms as they are articulated with one another within the realm of an equal and multicultural constitutional citizenship. In fact, the Western experience has revealed that as Western democracies have begun to link identity/difference claims to group rights rather than assimilating these groups, they were able to democratically solve the claims. Here, thinking of constitutional citizenship as an equal and multicultural citizenship has played a crucial role, insofar as it constituted both a common language among diverse groups to voice their own identity demands as a way of enlarging

their citizenship rights and freedoms, and also as a democratic ground for the state to effectively cope with these claims by accepting their difference yet at the same time promote equality between the groups in terms of their equal access to rights and freedoms.

Turkey is not an exemption in this context; on the contrary, it constitutes one of the most significant and illustrative cases where one could observe both the growing power of identity-based conflicts and also the debates and responses to them. In fact, since the 1990s, Turkey has increasingly been confronted with these conflicts, bringing about a tension between the universal and the particular, where at stake is the clash between the secular national identity as the bearer of cultural homogenization, and the revitalization of the language of difference through the resurgence of Islam, the reemergence of Kurdish nationalism in an organized form, the minority question and the increasing importance of civil society. Despite significant differences among them, especially within the context of their political agenda, all these movements directly challenge the unifying discourse of Turkish modernity on the basis of how the secularist Turkish nationalism reproduces itself. They have made identity-based claims, initiated calls for “recognition” and generated significant impacts on the formation of Turkish modernity and politics.

Of these movements, it is the “Kurdish question” that has been the most politically troublesome and challenging.<sup>5</sup> The Kurdish question has placed the issue of ethnic identity at the center of Turkish modernity and politics in a very effective way and as such, it has put its print on almost every aspect of societal relations in Turkey. It has also caused a very bloody and violent ethnic conflict, or “low-intensity war,” between government forces and the PKK (the Kurdistan Workers’ Party) which has left more than 40,000 people dead. In this sense, the Kurdish question has involved not only “a growing Kurdish ethnic assertiveness” in the form of identity politics which claims for a “recognition” of difference, but also, and more importantly and devastatingly, “a campaign of violence” carried out by the terrorist activities of the PKK. Thus, it has become impossible for Turkey to consolidate its democracy as both a political regime and as a political culture and a social system without attempting to resolve the Kurdish question. Without resolving this question, it would also not be possible for Turkey to remain powerful and stable in the rapidly changing, risky, uncertain and insecure global world, and to create an active, multi-faceted, democratic, and constructive vision of foreign policy.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, without resolving the Kurdish question, it would not be possible for Turkey to attain sustainable economic growth which simultaneously

creates macroeconomic stability and acts as a long-term solution to the social justice problems, namely those of poverty, unemployment and exclusion. Lastly, it would also not be possible to strengthen the norm and culture of living together in Turkey through the establishment of a regime of democratic, constitutional, multi-cultural and equal citizenship among diverse cultural identities.<sup>7</sup> The list can be extended with new additions including the phrase “not possible without resolving the Kurdish question”. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the Kurdish question constitutes the main obstacle to the creation of a more democratic, just, and stable Turkey.

The CHP took a very reactionary position on the democratic initiative, refusing even to deliberate on it, and dismissed it totally

Moreover, the embeddedness of identity claims into violent ethnic conflict has also rendered impossible a critical and problem-solving analysis of the Kurdish question. Instead, it has become an effective heuristic device for Kurdish and Turkish nationalist discourses to establish themselves as hegemonic in the political arena and to present themselves as providers of the “absolute truth” about the question. Rather than theoretical efforts aiming at providing a needed and necessary historical and critical analysis of the Kurdish question for its democratic solution, the political polarizations and the binary oppositions have dictated the *modus vivendi* of Turkish politics since the 1990s. Thus, disciplinary impositions are placed on the political imagination, effective restrictions are set in front of demands for democratization, and talks for possible solutions are deferred in the name of stability and normalization. Today, the end result of the reduction of the Kurdish question into the domain of nationalism with a strong ethnic focus has been the growing societal polarization over the question on ethnic lines, leading to a serious problem of intolerance among different cultural identities and a declining societal trust over the possibility of creating unity within diversity.

Given these problems, there is a need to deal effectively with the Kurdish question, which should proceed without assimilating the Kurds into the dominant majority culture; without focusing exclusively on economic factors and economic determinants; and without privileging security over democracy. Furthermore, since the Kurdish question involves the problem of terrorism, then dealing effectively with it also involves a strategy to stop terrorism, which should proceed by promoting democratic norms and procedures and the framework of the rule of law that will help develop and initiate strict and tough, yet legitimate, measures and responses backed by a strong societal consent against terrorism. These principles

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involve not surrendering to the terrorist; making no deals and no concessions, even in the face of the most severe intimidation; making an intensified effort to bring the terrorists to justice by prosecution and conviction before courts of law; and instituting tough measures to penalize the state sponsors who give terrorist movements safe haven, explosives, cash, and moral and diplomatic support.<sup>8</sup> As these principles are initiated within the

framework of the rule of law and democratic norms and procedures, and implemented as a part of a broader democratic initiative of conflict resolution based on the idea of multicultural constitutional citizenship, it would be possible to start the process of conflict resolution and to gain strong societal support for them.

It is in here that lies the significance of the democratic opening initiative. It is through this initiative that it would be possible to initiate both a strong fight against terrorism based on democratic norms and procedures, and an effective conflict resolution strategy for the Kurdish question by situating the basic norms of “social unity within cultural diversity” into the domain of “equal citizenship”. In doing so, the initiative would suggest furthering and upgrading Turkish democracy for each and every member of the political community and thereby make it possible to solve the Kurdish question, or at least minimize the terror dimension of it. Of course, the AK Party has launched its initiative seeing that there is a suitable international context for it. Turkey is increasingly important because of the role it can play in the future of Iraq, and the Middle East region in general; its pivotal state role for reducing the security risks-zones in the post-9/11 era; as well as its position as a growing “energy hub”. However, Turkey cannot play these significant roles unless the PKK terror is stopped.<sup>9</sup> The AK Party saw that the international environment was suitable for this initiative due to the growing importance of Turkey, and therefore initiated the democratic opening process by assuming that it can gain both political support from the opposition parties and social support from civil society organizations.

However, while civil society organizations were positive on the initiative, neither the CHP nor the MHP gave their support; on the contrary, they refused even to talk to the AK Party government about it. As an ideological party with a strong nationalist discourse, the negative position of the MHP has come as no surprise. However, as a mass party and having worked on the democratic solution to the





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Kurdish question during the 1990s, the CHP’s strong criticism of the initiative as an “unnecessary and risky move” whose end result would likely be the growing social disintegration of Turkish society, was difficult to understand and accept. The CHP took a very reactionary position on the initiative, refusing even to deliberate on it, and dismissed it totally. Why has the CHP developed a reactionary discourse and strategy on the initiative?

The democratic opening initiative, as noted, was an attempt to solve through an idea of equal citizenship an identity-based conflict that not only involves violence and terror, but also functions as the main obstacle to the possibility of a more democratic, just, and well governed Turkey. Moreover, the initiative was prepared at a time when there was a suitable international environment. Given this, why did the CHP prefer to strongly dismiss the initiative, a similar version of which it had prepared before? I suggest that there are two seemingly separate, but nevertheless intertwined reasons for that. Politically, the refusal of the CHP to support the initiative has to do with the fact that if the AK Party was successful in solving one of the most difficult problems of Turkey, it would easily win the coming 2011 general elections, which would strengthen what I call its “the electoral hegemony”. Discursively, as the main opposition party, the CHP’s strategy against the AK Party has been to represent the democratic initiative, concerning the Kurdish question, as a risk to both the secular constitutional regime and the territorial integrity of the state. This state-centric and reactionary strategy of the CHP would remain effective only as long as the AK Party continues to be per-

The CHP approaches the AK Party and the DTP as not simply political parties, but, in fact, political actors presenting an imminent and clear threat to the sovereignty of the nation-state

will elaborate on these two reasons, namely those of “electoral hegemony” and “state sovereignty”.

### **Electoral Hegemony vs. Defending the Polity**

Let me begin with the concept of the electoral hegemony, which has framed the CHP’s reactionary position on the initiative. It is no doubt that the consecutive electoral successes of the AK Party since 2002 have generated a political earthquake in Turkish politics and modernity. In the November 3, 2002 national elections, the three governing parties that had formed the coalition government after the 1999 national election, as well as two of the opposition parties, failed to pass the 10% national threshold; thrown outside the parliament, they all found themselves as the complete losers of the election. The sole winner of the election was the AK Party. By receiving 34.2% of the popular votes and with the aid of the undemocratic 10% national threshold, the party gained 66% of the parliamentary seats (that is, 363 of 550 seats) and constituted a strong majority government. Although the AK Party had come into existence as one of the two parties that emerged from the constitutionally banned Virtue Party, whose Islamic identity and discourse had been seen by the Constitutional Court as a threat to the secular foundation of the Turkish Republic, the AK Party’s electoral success, leading to its majority government, was welcomed by a large part of Turkish society longing for political stability and effective governance. On the evening of July 22, 2007, the following general election results created another political earthquake. This time, the AK Party won “a landslide victory, receiving 47% of the vote, the largest share for a single party since the elections of 1957, and it was only the second occasion since 1954, in which the incumbent party significantly increased its vote share in a subsequent election.”<sup>10</sup> Despite a number of serious attempts undertaken by the military, judiciary, opposition parties, the media, and civil society organizations to confront the AK Party’s mode of governance on the basis of the party’s alleged intentions to make Turkey a moderately Islamic society by dismantling the secular foundations of the political regime -the manifestations of which were

ceived by at least some segments of society as an actor whose existence is a risk for the regime. The democratic opening initiative, if it is successful, would imply also the failure of the strategy of the CHP and its discourse of what I call “state sovereignty” which operates on the basis of an understanding of politics as “friend-foe relations”. In what follows, I

observed in the widespread resentment in secular segments of society to the announcement of Abdullah Gül as the AK Party’s candidate for the new president of Turkey- the July 22, 2007 elections resulted not only with the fortification of the power of the AK Party government, but also in the elimination of all the attempts to stop Abdullah Gül from becoming president; soon after the election, Abdullah Gül became the new president of Turkey.

Similar developments occurred in the March 2004 and March 2009 municipal elections. In both elections, despite the decline in its votes to 38.8% in March 2009, not only has the AK Party won most of the provincial or greater city mayorships, “the opposition gained little” and “no single opposition party... gathered the electoral momentum” with which to present itself as a strong candidate to end the AK Party majority government in the coming 2011 general elections.<sup>11</sup> After the March 2009 municipal elections, the AK Party seemed to have returned to its reform-based politics with which it had gained a significant degree of domestic and international support and legitimacy in the 2002-2006 period.<sup>12</sup> Such recent attempts of the party in the areas of democracy, foreign policy and economy, such as the democratic opening initiative to cope effectively with the Kurdish question, “the good-neighborhood policy-based” attempts to enhance peace and dialogue in Turkey-Armenia relations, the abolishment of visa requirements to deepen Turkey-Syria relations, and the initiation of an economic reform package to revitalize the Turkish economy, all indicate that the party is preparing itself for the 2011 national election in a way to maintain its popular support and to continue to govern Turkey as a strong majority government.

The success of the AK Party in all these elections has been so strong that it has brought about what can be called the “electoral hegemony” of the party in Turkish politics, as well as in the eyes and perceptions of the electorate as a whole. Without attributing a strong conceptual quality to it, I think that electoral hegemony is a useful concept to explain both the increasing gap between the AK Party and the opposition parties in terms of their capacity for winning elections, and the increasing frustration of the supporters of the opposition parties, especially the secular-urban-educated middle classes voting for the CHP, and for the future of the secular regime and modernity in Turkey. As the AK Party maintains its electoral hegemony, it becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the opposition parties to enjoy electoral success and govern Turkey, which leads to the increasing pessimism and frustration of their voters about their identity, status and position in society. In this sense, the concept of electoral hegemony refers to a situation in which the dominance of one party in the electoral process becomes so strong

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that not only can the parties not have a claim to win the elections, but also, and more importantly, the supporters of these parties lose faith in their own parties' electoral success. As the 2002, 2004, 2007 and 2009 general and municipal election results indicate, the dominance of the AK Party in the electoral process constitutes a kind of electoral hegemony

in which it acts and governs Turkey without strong opposition, but at the same time there arise increasingly frustrated and insecure social segments, mainly the secular middle classes. The electoral hegemony of the AK Party, therefore, creates a crisis-prone Turkey, that, while producing a strong majority government, generates powerful social and political polarizations within political and civil society, and institutional clashes between the military and judiciary state elite and the AK Party government.<sup>13</sup>

Against the electoral hegemony of the AK Party, the CHP has chosen to focus its political strategy on the growing fears and insecurities of the secular segments and middle classes for the future of the secular modernity in which they have been the dominant class since the inception of Turkey as a modern nation-state. The CHP has fed from the increasing social and political polarization, as well as from the emerging institutional clashes within the political arena, and has represented itself as a party whose main aim is to defend the existing secular constitutional regime. It has justified this strategy by linking its historical identity of being the bearer and the implementer of the Republican modernity with its recent role of defending the political substance of the modern Turkey, that is, the secular and homogeneous political community. Thus, as opposed to the electoral hegemony of the AK Party stemming from its consecutive electoral successes, the CHP's political strategy has been to shift the focus of political competition from *politics* (where competition takes place among political parties) to *polity* (that is, the constitutional and institutional norms, values and decision-making procedures that frame the competition among political parties), and thus to present itself as the defender of the existing polity. The CHP has thus justified its attempts to compete against the AK Party not through the means of electoral democracy, but through the institutions and norms of the polity (the military and the judiciary). In defining its main aim, it has given normative and political primacy to the need to defend the secular regime over its electoral success, and has positioned itself as the main representative and defender of the secular segments of society. With this strategy, the CHP

has become the main opposition party, increased its popular support to around 20%, strengthened its linkages with both the state elite and the secular segments of society, and has situated itself in the political arena as the main actor that defends and carries the norms and the institutions of secular modernity.

### Sovereignty as a Heuristic Device

How did the CHP justify its strategy of challenging the AK Party’s electoral hegemony by locating itself in the realm of polity rather than politics? Here the concept of sovereignty appears to be of utmost importance. It is through linking its challenge to the AK Party with the discourse of “sovereignty” that the CHP has been able to define itself not only as a political party, but also as an actor whose historical mission is to secure the sovereign and secular Turkish state. To understand how the concept of sovereignty can be used to make polity the main realm of political competition, it is useful to pause and reflect theoretically on the double function of sovereignty in modern times.

The concept of sovereignty has been widely discussed in the fields of law, international law, international relations, and political theory, and in these, it has been associated with the modern nation-state and its territorial-central-sovereign quality. It has been accepted that state sovereignty is a legal term referring to the recognition of the state by the international community as an independent territorial authority having both the capacity and the right to govern its society. In this sense, the principles of “recognition” and “autonomy” of the state, with which the state acts as a central and supreme authority in a given territorially-bound national community, have been central to the study of sovereignty. This understanding of sovereignty has suggested that state sovereignty is constitutive of modern political life, and this suggestion has been commonly accepted in these fields as a “fact” of modern politics, and a general definition of what sovereignty is. This is in fact true, and in modern times the sovereignty of the nation-state constitutes a fact in both domestic and international politics. However, as R.B.J. Walker suggests, “the manner in which this ‘fact’ is known and treated as obvious tells us a great deal about the conditions under which claims about democracy, freedom, equality, and the rest have been constructed and deemed to be contestable. It tells us especially about the limits within which that contestability is constrained and fixed through a historically specific account of the possibilities of political community and human identity”.<sup>14</sup> What is significant in Walker’s intervention is that it creates a significant shift in our understanding of state sovereignty from *what sovereignty is* to *what sovereignty does*, or *how it functions as a technology of governing*. In fact, the study of state sovereignty becomes more interesting and crucial

as it explores the ways in which it functions as an integral part, or as a constitutive practice, of the state to act as the hegemonic actor of governance.

Walker's approach to the concept of state sovereignty as an heuristic device by which the state establishes its hegemonic power in the process of governance concurs with Carl Schmitt's famous definition of sovereignty in his book *Political Theology* as "he who decides on the state of exception."<sup>15</sup> Schmitt's definition also concerns what sovereignty does, and provides an account of politics as a decision about how to protect the founding principles of the regime. According to Schmitt, sovereignty is in fact a determination of the boundaries and substance of a political community, as well as who belongs or does not belong to that community. The state of exception occurs in a moment when the state finds it necessary and imperative to take a decision about how to save its political substance, and that decision also gives rise to an understanding of politics as a decision about "who is loyal to the political community", that is, politics as a "friend-foe relationship".

In criticizing Schmitt's understanding of sovereignty, Giorgio Agamben suggests that the concept of state sovereignty, "and of constituent power, which are at the core of our political tradition, have to be abandoned or, at least, to be thought all over again. They mark, in fact, the point of indifference between right and violence, nature of logos, proper and improper; and as such they do not designate an attribute or an organ of the juridical system or of the state; they designate, rather, their own original structure. Sovereignty is the idea of an undecidable nexus between violence and right... -a nexus that necessarily takes the paradoxical form of a decision regarding the state of exception (Schmitt) or ban (Nancy)... Sovereignty, therefore, is the guardian who prevents the undecidable threshold between violence and right...from coming to light...that the state of exception is the rule".<sup>16</sup> In this context, Agamben, like Walker, makes a significant contribution to our understanding of state sovereignty by pointing out its function as the guardian of a political community whose effectiveness lies in its capacity to make what is supposed to be an exception the general rule of governing society. It is here that the linkage between sovereignty and security emerges. To secure the substance of its political community, the state acts as a sovereign actor assuming a hegemonic role. In doing so, the hegemonic state attempts to establish the boundaries of the political community by declaring who belongs or does not belong to the political community, and also sets the horizon of the modern political imagination about identity, democracy and liberty.

I suggest that Walker, Schmitt, and Agamben, in their own ways relate the concept of sovereignty to that of governing. In this sense, they provide a much

more sophisticated account attending not only to the role of sovereignty in the creation of political community, but also, in Walker and Agamben, to the problem of legitimacy embedded in this process. Moreover, I suggest that the critical analysis of sovereignty in relation to the question of governing sheds light on the way in which the CHP has refused to support

the democratic opening initiative and its attempt to shift from politics to polity in its challenge to the AK Party’s electoral hegemony. Sovereignty as a way of securing the substance of the political community by determining who belongs to that community, and also of bringing about an idea of politics based on the friend-foe relationship, frames to a large extent the mode in which the CHP does politics, competes with the AK Party, and approaches the democratic opening initiative.<sup>17</sup> Sovereignty as a technology of governing allows the CHP to define its politics as a necessary act of securing the secular and territorial substance of the nation, to suggest that those whose actions and discourse are against the sovereignty should be viewed as a threat to the political community. Hence the CHP approaches the AK Party and the Democratic Society Party (Demokratik Toplum Partisi, DTP) as not simply political parties, but, in fact, political actors presenting an imminent and clear threat to the sovereignty of the nation-state. Insofar as the CHP sees both parties as the foe of the secular and territorial constitutional regime as an expression of the nation, it adopts a Schmittian understanding of politics as a friend-foe relationship. This understanding of politics also justifies the shift from politics to polity that the CHP initiates in its attempt to locate its politics in the realm of the latter. The CHP has situated the AK Party as the foe of the nation, or of the secular and territorial political community, and in doing so, justified its choice of doing politics in the realms of polity as a necessary, if not imperative, act of defending Turkish modernity against its foe. The AK Party’s initiative, in this sense, according to the CHP, was an act, initiated by a foe, of not strengthening, but weakening the social amalgam of Turkey, and due precisely to this fact it has to be resisted and refused.

In this sense, the AK Party’s policies and its electoral hegemony in Turkish politics and modernity have pushed the CHP to a) lean more and more on the concept of sovereignty and polity, and b) to employ the idea of politics not as a political competition among political parties through their policies, or to respond to societal demands coming from different social classes and cultural identities,

The more the CHP has initiated a reactionary and security-based politics, the more Turkey has become divided on the basis of the secular vs. religious cleavage, and the national self vs. cultural difference cleavage

## The CHP's reactionary politics has been the main obstacle to the possibility of consolidating democracy in Turkey

but, on the contrary, as a friend-foe relationship entailing an act of taking a decision about how to secure the substance of the political community. In fact, the more the CHP has initiated such a reactionary and security-based politics, the

more Turkey has become divided on the basis of the secular vs. religious cleavage, and the national self vs. cultural difference cleavage. Maybe, through basing its politics on these cleavages, the CHP has increased its societal support to 20.88% in the 2007 general elections, and to 23.1% in the 2009 local elections, and secured its main opposition party position. Yet, the CHP's reactionary politics has been the main obstacle to the possibility, indeed the necessity, of consolidating democracy in Turkey, which requires the democratic and sustainable solution to the Kurdish question through the enlargement of citizenship rights and freedoms to the extent of making each and every member of political community equal citizens.

### Conclusion

Today, there is a need to recognize the omnipotence of the Kurdish identity not as the dangerous Other creating an environment and feeling of insecurity for the territorial integrity of Turkish society, but as a social and historical fact that cannot be wished away, whose identity-based claims for recognition can be responded to through an understanding of equal and multicultural constitutional citizenship. Moreover, to the extent that the idea of equal and multicultural citizenship means the enlargement of rights and freedoms not only for Kurds, but for each and every member of Turkish society, the democratic opening initiative, if successful, would result in the emergence of a common language, a common identity, within cultural diversity, giving rise to the strengthening of the norms of living together and social cohesion in Turkey, rather than leading to social disintegration. In this context, the CHP's reaction to the initiative, in order to challenge the AK Party's electoral hegemony, cannot be justified. Moreover, the CHP's choice of initiating its act of politics in the realm of the polity and through a Schmittian understanding of politics as a friend-foe relationship should be criticized on the ground that rather than contributing to a more stable, secure and tolerant Turkey, it has led to the widening and deepening of social and political polarizations and institutional clashes in Turkey. There is no doubt that the AK Party government, while focusing exclusively on its electoral hegemony, has done little to increase and widen social trust and ontological security felt in every sphere and by every member of society. This is true. What is equally true is that



the CHP’s reactionary discourse and acts of politics, reducing the AK Party to the position of the foe of the political community, has been wrong and negative. The Kurdish question remains to be solved. Turkish democracy remains unconsolidated. Turkish society has yet to be confronted by the growing risks of disunity and segregation. The answer to the question of what is to be done lies in the idea of equal and multicultural citizens, which the democratic opening initiative has aimed to yield. Given the existence of the suitable international environment, as well as the AK Party government’s continuing will to carry on the initiative, there is still reason for cautious optimism. To render cautious optimism into a realistic project, it is necessary, if not imperative, for the CHP to go back to its previous democratic position on the Kurdish question and to engage with the government in a critical and constructive manner, so as to make the democratic opening initiative gain more realism, more societal support, and more legitimacy. Of course, this would first entail, on the part of the CHP, acting politically, and thinking democratically.

## Endnotes

1. Ümit Cizre, “The Emergence of the ‘Government’s Perspective on the Kurdish Issue’”, *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 11, No. 4, 2009, p. 1.

2. For a detailed analysis of this double-identity of the CHP, see E. Fuat Keyman and Ziya Oniş, *Turkish Politics in a Changing World* (İstanbul: Bilgi University Publications, 2007) chp. 10.

3. In fact, during the 1990s, when the Kurdish question was reduced totally into a low-intensity war between the Turkish military and the PKK, the CHP was the only political actor suggesting that rather than the military solution, democratic deliberation would pave the way to a long-term and sustainable solution to the problem, and it provided a number of proposals designed to frame the official position of the party on the Kurdish question. For these reports, see the CHP website.

4. For detail, see E.F. Keyman (ed.), *Remaking Turkey* (Oxford: Rowman Little, 2008).

5. E.F. Keyman and Z.Oniş, *Turkish Politics in a Changing World* (İstanbul: Bilgi University Publications, 2008).

6. B. Park, *Turkey’s Policy towards Northern Iraq: Problems and Perspectives*, Adelphi Paper 374, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2005.

7. E. F. Keyman, “Articulating citizenship and identity: the Kurdish question in Turkey”, E.F. Keyman and A. İçduygu, (eds.), *Citizenship in a Global World: European Questions and Turkish Experiences* (London: Routledge, 2005); M. Yeğen, *Müstakbel Türk’ten Sözde Vatandaşta*, (İstanbul: İletişim, 2006).

8. P. Wilkinson, *Terrorism versus Democracy*, (London: Polity, 2003), pp. 233-234.

9. E.F. Keyman, “Turkish Foreign Policy in a Globalizing World”, *TPQ*, Vol. 8:1, 2009, pp. 35-43.

10. R. Karakaya Polat, “The 2007 Parliamentary Elections in Turkey”, *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 62, No. 1, p. 130.

11. A. Çarkoğlu, “Turkey’s local elections of 2009: winners and losers”, *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 11, No. 2, (May 2009), p. 13.

12. For an analysis of the reform-based politics of the AK Party in the period between 2002-2006, and its move away from reform since 2007, see E.F. Keyman and Z. Oniř, *Turkish Politics in a Changing World* (İstanbul: Bilgi University Publications, 2007), chp.3 and 4.

13. For more detail, see, E.F. Keyman, “Modernization, Globalization and Democratization in Turkey; The AK Party Experience and its Limits”, *Constellations*, forthcoming, 2010.

14. R.B. J. Walker, *Inside/Outside* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 190.

15. C. Schmitt, *Political Theology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), p. 12.

16. G. Agamben, *Homer Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 112.

17. The DTP was the main political actor of Kurds in the National Assembly. It was closed by the Constitutional Court in 2009 with the charge that its activities and discourses were promoting the PKK terror, and in doing so, constituting a clear and present threat to the territorial integrity of the state. After the closure decision, the DTP was replaced by the Peace and Democracy Party (the BDP). In fact, the party closure cases against the AK Party, as well as against the DTP, were founded on the idea of sovereignty as a technology of governing, and of politics as a friend-foe relationship.