

# **Conservative Globalism at the Crossroads: The Justice and Development Party and the Thorny Path to Democratic Consolidation in Turkey**

Ziya Öniş\*

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*The article builds on the premise that the standard left-right division is not a meaningful characterization of Turkish politics. Political competition in Turkey in present the era is increasingly characterized by a contest between “conservative globalists” and “defensive nationalists” and the political environment is marked by the conspicuous absence of a European style left of center, social democratic party. The article investigates the kinds of influences that enabled the Justice and Development Party to enlarge its electoral coalition in 2007 suggesting an even bigger swing of the pendulum towards conservative globalists compared to the situation in the previous election of 2002. It also tries to highlight the inherent weaknesses of conservative globalism and points towards the absence of effective and constructive opposition as a means of explaining the recent instability and re-polarization in Turkish politics which constitutes a major obstacle on the path to democratic consolidation*

Key words: democratization, post-Islamist politics, coalition building, crises, Turkey

## **1. Introduction**

Turkish politics in the recent era has been characterized by significant transformation and a considerable degree of instability. Important steps have been taken towards democratic consolidation as part of a part a broader Europeanization process. At the same time, recent developments suggest that the process of democratic consolidation is far from complete. Turkey in 2008 continues to project an image of a highly polarized society. Although the recent Constitutional Court ruling not to ban the governing party on the basis of its alleged

anti-secular activities created a temporary breathing space and an air of stability, this should not be interpreted as a sign of a durable consensus. The present paper builds upon and extends earlier contributions as a basis for understanding the dynamics of Turkish politics in the context of the general elections of 2007 [see Öniş, 2007; Öniş & Keyman, 2003]. The framework developed is also used to illuminate some of the unexpected developments in the post-election era which have been associated with considerable instability and further polarization in Turkish politics.

The central claim is that traditional distinctions such as the left versus right, center versus periphery and other similar distinctions have limited explanatory power in terms of understanding the Turkish party system [see Sayarı, 2007]. A better conceptualization of Turkish political dynamics can be made in terms of conservative globalists versus defensive nationalists. Indeed, this conceptualization appears to provide an even better representation of the composition of the Turkish parliament after the July 2007 elections than has been the case in the earlier election of 2002. The conservative globalist label characterizes the ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (the AKP) whereas the principal opposition parties, the Republican People's Party (the CHP) and the Nationalist Action Party (the MHP) constituted the defensive nationalist bloc. Liberal globalists or social democrats with a transformationalist globalist agenda are not properly represented in this environment. A central argument, therefore, is that Turkish democracy constitutes a one-dimensional democracy where the absence of a European style social democratic party constitutes an important democratic deficit.

The term conservative globalism signifies an unusual synthesis of liberal and conservative elements. It signifies a favorable attitude towards engagement with global markets, democratization reforms and progress towards EU membership. At the same time, it involves a defense of traditional values and appeals to the conservative instincts of large segments of voters cutting across traditional class divisions in the process. The combination of a progressive and modernist vision with a conservative face and support for traditional values has provided the AKP with a considerable edge over its rivals and has brought considerable success in two consecutive general elections. The defensive, inward-oriented nationalistic visions of the rival parties with their authoritarian biases and fear-based politics have projected anti-progressive image and have, indeed, been counterproductive, contributing further to the AKP's electoral success. At the same time, conservative globalism as an

ideology is prone to tensions and contradictions and such tensions have clearly come on to the surface in aftermath of the 2007 elections. The paper tries to explain the factors which have contributed to the AKP's extra-ordinary electoral success in July 2007. Based on the tensions inherent in "conservative globalism", it also tries to account for the decline of the reformist orientation of the party in spite of the fact that it enjoyed such a broad mandate of support in the aftermath of the general election.

## 2. The AKP's Enlarged Electoral Coalition: The Underlying Dynamics

The AKP has managed to expand its share of the national vote from 34 percent in November 2002 to 47 percent in July 2007. This clearly constitutes a case of phenomenal success [Çarkoğlu, 2007]. Normally, in western democracies, one would expect such party to experience a certain decline in its popularity due governmental fatigue having being in office over a period of four and a half years. The outcome also appears surprising given that this was a period of neo-liberal structuring during which the government implemented tight budgetary discipline under the auspices of a far-reaching IMF program. Fiscal discipline in the form of expenditure cuts such as reductions in agricultural subsidies and tax increases under normal circumstances tend to create a sizeable group of losers in economic terms and, therefore, contribute to a process whereby government experience a loss of popularity and a corresponding decline in their broad electoral coalitions. Hence, at first sight the AKP's success in 2007 appeared somewhat paradoxical. To account for this apparent paradox, I would like to underline the importance of the following set of interrelated influences.

First and foremost, the AKP's popularity was heavily boosted by a period of unusual economic growth helped by a highly favorable global liquidity environment. Having emerged from a deep financial crisis in 2001, the Turkish economy experienced one of its most successful phases in its post-war economy. Turkey managed to combine high rates of economic growth in the order of 7.5 percent per annum during the 2002-2006 period [see Öniş & Bayram, 2008; also Yavuz, 2006 and Cizre, 2007]. The combination of high growth and low inflation helped to enlarge the coalition of winners from the neo-liberal globalization

process helping to boost the party's electoral fortunes. Possible inter-class and intra-class distributional conflicts which could have emerged in a slow growth environment were effectively avoided. Although the benefits of growth were not evenly distributed, the poor and the less privileged segments of society also benefited from the favorable mix of high growth and single digit inflation. Going back to the time of the November 2002 elections, one of the major fears of key segments of the business community, both domestic and external, was that the AKP as a party of the "underdog" or the "periphery", with a large proportion of urban and rural poor in its electoral coalition, would indulge in a new round of populist expansionism and Turkey would find itself in the midst of yet another populist cycle and a possible crisis, as has been frequently case in the previous cases. Fortunately, the AKP, in office, displayed a deep commitment to fiscal discipline and economic reform. Whilst it was somewhat critical of the IMF in opposition, its approach in government was very much in line with the kind of disciplines and reforms promoted by the IMF and the European Union. The AKP did not initiate the stabilization and reform program itself. The "strong economy" program was already in the process of being implemented under the leadership of Kemal Derviş<sup>1</sup> in the context of the coalition government in the immediate aftermath of the 2001 crisis. Yet, the AKP, when it came to power in November 2002 has shown the ability and the determination to build upon rather than to deviate from the existing program. Indeed, the AKP, in government, has displayed an unexpectedly strong commitment, especially in its early years, to both the economic reform agenda and the overall reform process associated with EU membership. The fact that the party enjoyed a comfortable majority in the parliament provided it with an extra edge in terms of overcoming opposition and maintaining the momentum of the reform process, both in the economic and the political spheres.

The second important element underlying the party's success in 2007 highlights one of its paradoxical features. There is a tendency to view the AKP as a proto-type case of a party committed to free market liberalism. A closer examination however reveals a commitment to neo-liberalism with a human face. The party was able to capitalize on its systematic efforts to help the poor through improved local government services and a variety of schemes involving the targeting of the poor through both formal and informal channels.<sup>2</sup> Admittedly, its approach to redistribution was in line with the spirit of neo-liberalism in the sense that charity-based redistribution was emphasized more than state-based forms of redistribution. Building on the traditions of political parties with an Islamist heritage in Turkey (and possibly elsewhere in the Middle East), the party was able to generate and maintain a large electoral

coalition which is able to keep together both the winners and the losers of the neo-liberal globalization process. The important point to emphasize here is that the redistribution was accomplished on a sustained basis in a systematic manner as opposed to simply providing free hand-outs on a once for all basis shortly before elections with a purely instrumental logic of obtaining electoral support. Arguably, there is an underlying concern with social justice issues on the part of the AKP which cannot simply be dismissed as a short-term strategy to maximize its voting potential at the time of a general election.

This brings us to the third element that narrow economic perceptions fail to capture fully the appeal of the AKP to large segments of the Turkish electorate. As a third underlying element, for people in different layers of Turkish society, the AKP represented a reformist party in the wider sense of the term.<sup>3</sup> The party's commitment to EU membership, for example, was a clear manifestation of this reformist and progressive tendency. During the course of government, the AKP was quite effective in its strategy of projecting itself as a progressive and society-centered political project. At the same time, the party was careful to emphasize that society's core values and moral standards would be a contributor rather than an obstacle to progress. Hence, we see how "globalism" and "conservatism" became embedded in the AKP's broad project and how, through this uneasy synthesis of globalism and conservatism, the party was able to appeal to diverse elements in Turkish society and build a broad base of electoral support which effectively transcended traditional boundaries based on class or identity.

The fourth element involved the absence of effective opposition. One of the ironies of the recent Turkish political landscape has been the fact that opposition parties on the left and the right have been characterized by their defensiveness and inward-orientated visions. The politics of opposition was based on *securitization of politics*, in other words *the politics of fear*. The fears originated from the belief that the Europeanization and the reform process would come into conflict with the basic constitutional premises of the Turkish Republic and would threaten the unity and the secular character of the Turkish state. Hence, the principal opposition parties saw their mission as protecting the Turkish state at all based on a rather rigid understanding of secularism and national sovereignty. In the presence of such fundamental threats, a concern with economic and social issues appeared to be largely irrelevant and of secondary importance.<sup>4</sup> The AKP was able to capitalize on the weaknesses of the opposition parties by presenting itself as a reformist party with deep roots in Turkish

society, an image which became all the more striking when contrasted with the elitist and the anti-reform attitudes of the opposition parties. What was striking in the context of the 2007 elections was that even liberal elements which would have normally voted for other parties chose to vote for the AKP. Similarly, politicians who would normally be engaged in politics in a social democratic or a center-right party have joined the ranks of the AKP because they perceived the party as the main *progressive or reformist element in Turkish politics*.

What could be characterized as *the societal backlash to the nationalist resurgence and top-down interventionism in the functioning of the democratic processes* could be singled out as the fifth major element. Turkey experienced a tide of nationalistic resurgence during the 2005-2007 era. Several factors have contributed to this process which has already been well-documented [see Grigoriadis, 2006]. What is significant in the present context is that the chain of events associated with the broad nationalistic backlash involving the “e-intervention” on the part of the military during a presidential election process and the subsequent “Republican rallies” proved to be rather counterproductive in the electoral sphere.<sup>5</sup> Ironically, this set of events has helped to punish the nationalistic parties on the right and the left of the political spectrum. In fact, ironically the AKP was able to enlarge its base of electoral support in the months leading to the general election in 2007 as vast segments of Turkish electorate displayed their resentment against top-down interventionism in the democratic political progress. Perhaps, this could also be interpreted as a sign of the growing maturity of Turkish democracy, on the path to democratic consolidation.

As the sixth major element, *The AKP’s positive engagement with the Kurds and its promise to resolve the Kurdish conflict* enabled the party (in complete contrast to the established opposition parties) to mobilize effectively in the predominantly Kurdish South-Eastern regions of the country. This was all the more striking at a time when the ten percent electoral threshold was effectively circumvented or by-passed by the practice of sending independent deputies to the Parliament which was one of the novelties of the 2007 elections. Again the ability to engage with the Kurds is a good example of *effective grassroots activism* which sharply differentiated the AKP from its principal rivals.

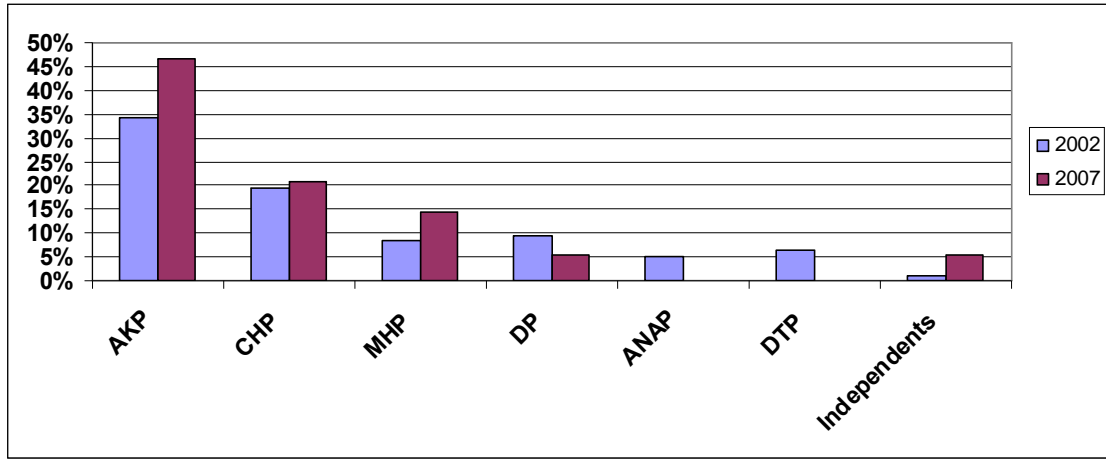
Last but not the least, the importance of *leadership and ability to learn and adapt to changing environments* could be identified as yet another critical contributory element. The AKP was characterized by its adaptability and pragmatism whereas the main opposition parties were

characterized by their in-built *resilience and strong ideological bias*. Differences in leadership style are also something that needs to be emphasized in the present context. Turkish political parties are leader-dominated parties. In the AKP context the leader is also important; yet, there appears to be more delegation, team work and sharing of authority and responsibility compared to its principal rivals.

### 3. The Multiple Meanings of the Turkish General Elections of 2007

In retrospect, the 2007 general elections represent a landmark election, constituting a turning point in Turkish politics in a number of important respects. The election clearly represented a victory for the conservative globalist camp. The AKP has built on its success in the 2002 general and the 2004 local elections to increase its lead over its principal rival, the Republican People's Party, the CHP ( figure 1) A comparison of the election results of 2002 and 2007 clearly indicates that the AKP's success is an across-the-board phenomenon and is not confined to the key inner Anatolian cities such as Konya and Kayseri which represent the centers of the rising Islamic bourgeoisie or the new conservative middle classes and often identified as the traditional stronghold of Islamist politics in Turkey ( figure 2). Admittedly, the AKP's lead over its principal rivals has been even more pronounced in such inner Anatolian strongholds (figure 3). What is striking, however, is that the party has emerged as a clear winner in the major metropolitan centers such as Ankara and Istanbul with Izmir being the only exception (figure 4). A cursory examination of the electoral map for 2007 suggests that there are very few areas of the country where the AKP has failed to establish itself as the leading party and these are cities which are located in the Western part of the country along the Aegean coast or in the Marmara region.

#### Figure 1 Electoral performance of the major parties 2002 and 2007



Source: Tuncer (2007)

Figure 2 Electoral maps for 2002 and 2007

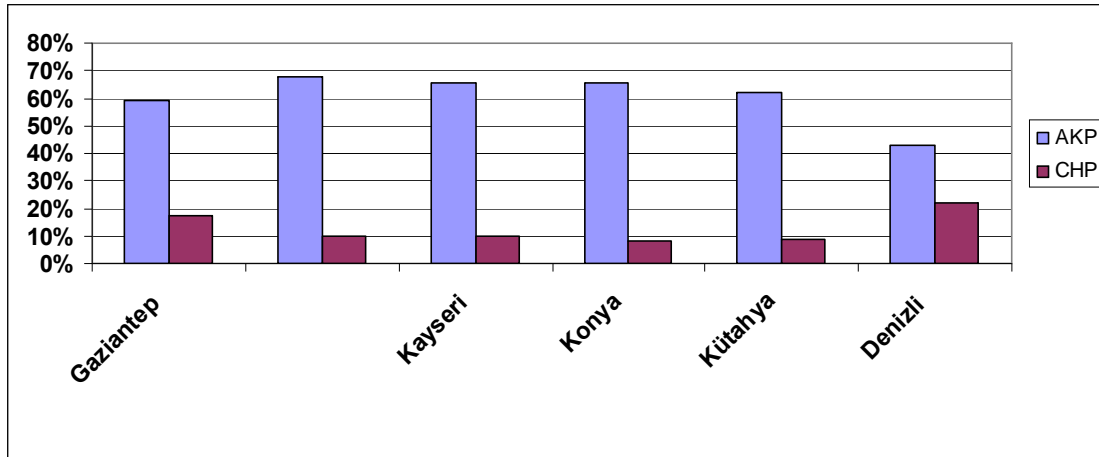


Source: Compiled and re-illustrated from the 2007 national elections data and Tuncer (2007)



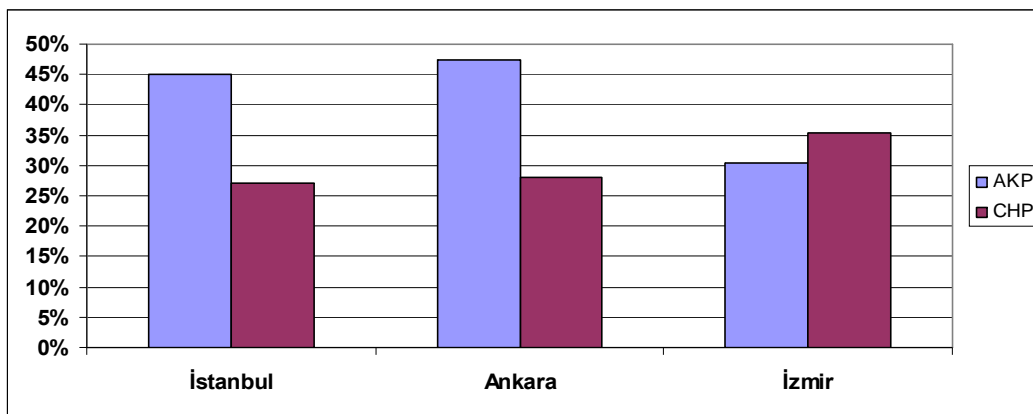
Source: Tuncer (2007)

Figure 3: Performance of the Traditional Centers of Islamist politics



Source: Tuncer (2007)

Figure 4: AKP's Success in Major Metropolitan Centers



Source: Tuncer (2007)

What was also striking in 2007 was the internal transformation experienced by the AKP itself, which was reflected in the changing composition of the deputies elected to the Parliament. A large number of deputies originally associated with the “National Outlook Movement” forming the basis of Islamist politics in modern Turkey were replaced by a new group of deputies which were more representative of the traditional center-right and center-left in the Turkish context. New AKP deputies included both liberals and social democrats. Indeed, it

was quite astonishing that a number of key social democrat politicians decided to resume their political careers under the domain of the AKP after 2007. The changing composition the deputies bolstered the image of the party as an increasingly moderate party of the center. The AKP in 2007 increasingly projected the image of a party which was more in the spirit of the dominant center-right tradition in Turkish politics which started with the Democrat Party of Adnan Menderes in the 1950s and continued with Süleyman Demirel's Justice Party in the 1960s and the 1970s, Turgut Özal's Motherland's Party (the ANAP) in the 1980s and most recently with Demirel's and Tansu Çiller's True Path Party (the DYP) of the 1990s. At the same time, the party seemed to diverge in quite a radical manner from the more radical Islamist line initiated with Necmettin Erbakan's National Salvation Party of the 1970s and continued with Erbakan's Welfare Party in the 1980s and the 1990s. The mood in 2007 was, therefore, quite different from what was back in November 2002. Although many skeptics remained, both liberal intellectuals and the public at large were prepared to see the AKP much more as a moderate party of the center rather than a party with a strong Islamist lineage which is fundamentally at odds with a secular constitutional order.<sup>6</sup>

The “defensive nationalist camp” although a clear loser of the 2007 elections, nonetheless, constituted a powerful bloc in the parliament, with the CHP and its unlikely ally, the ultra-nationalist, the MHP, accounting for 20,88 and 14,27 percent of the vote, respectively. In a sense, the conservative globalist versus defensive nationalist division is even more representative of Turkish politics in 2007 than in 2002 given the transformation of the CHP itself over the first five years of the AKP government: Indeed, one of the paradoxical features of recent Turkish politics has involved an increasing convergence of opinion involving the CHP and the MHP on a number of key political and foreign policy issues.

Arguably, the parliament which emerged after 2007 allowed a better representation of divergent political interests. In 2002, only two parties were represented in parliament accounting for 53,67 percent of the overall vote. Due to the notorious ten percent threshold, other contending parties were prevented from entering the parliament as a consequence of which 46,33 percent of the votes cast were effectively wasted. In 2007, the MHP emerged as the third major bloc within parliament allowing Turkish nationalists a strong presence in the parliament. The 2007 elections will also be remembered as a turning point in the sense that for the first time in recent Turkish political history, the ten percent electoral threshold was effectively side-stepped by the election of a large number of independent deputies. The major

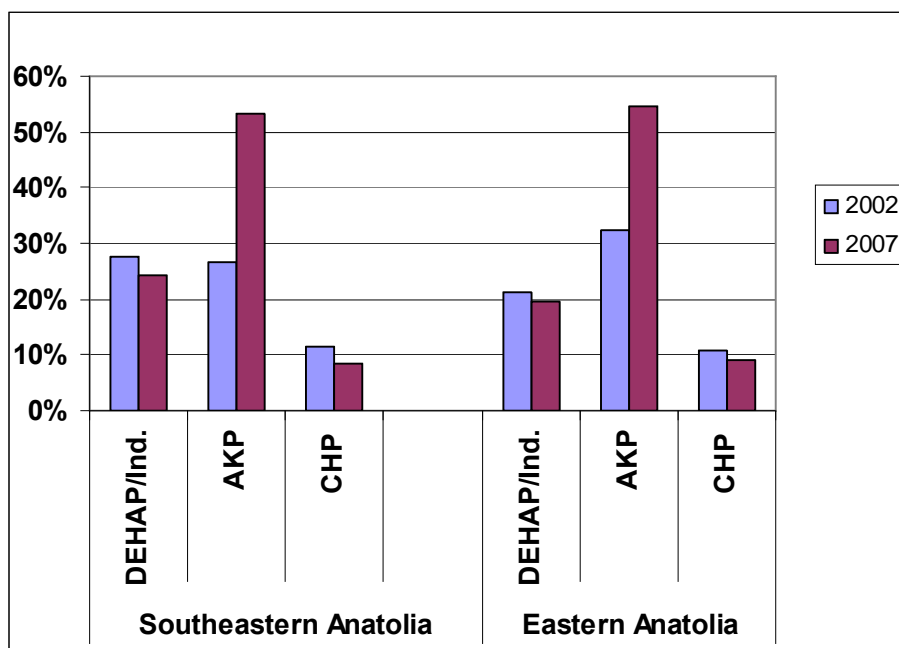
ramification of this was that Kurdish nationalists were also represented in parliament alongside Turkish nationalists. Out of the 28 independent deputies elected, 26 were from the South-east and would have normally voted for the predominantly regional Kurdish nationalist party. Indeed, once the new parliament was formed, these independent deputies re-joined the Kurdish nationalist party, the Democratic Turkey Party, the DTP, constituting the fourth major bloc in the new Parliament.

The ten percent electoral threshold nevertheless continued to penalize some of the well-established parties on both the center-right and the center-left of the political spectrum. For example, the DYP and the ANAP, the major center-right parties of the post-1980 era were excluded from the Parliament even though their combined share of the vote was 14,67 percent. The failure of such parties to by-pass the high electoral threshold has clearly benefited the leading party, the AKP. There is no doubt that many voters have refrained themselves from voting for alternative center-right parties on the assumption that their votes would be wasted because of the ten percent formula.<sup>7</sup> Such perceptions have also helped to boost the AKP's electoral fortunes whilst tending to penalize its principal alternatives. This again highlights the distortion that the ten percent electoral threshold introduced into the Turkish political system and its continuing importance, though on a much smaller scale than in the past, in limiting the degree of competition and restricting the degree of participation in Turkish politics.

Finally, one of the most striking features of the 2007 election involved the AKP's extraordinary electoral success in the predominantly Kurdish regions of the south-east. Indeed, for the first time in recent Turkish history, a mainstream political party claimed a higher percentage of the votes than a regional party (figure 5). The AKP accounted for 53,14 of the overall vote the south-east. The combined share of the independent deputies representing the regional or the ethnic nationalist alternative emerged as 24,40 percent, falling significantly short of the AKP's performance. In contrast, other major political parties, notably the CHP, were totally ineffective in their attempts to mobilize political support in this critical region. The superior performance of the AKP in this region was a reflection of the combined impact of several different elements. The AKP has clearly capitalized on the large amount of public investment directed to the region during the first five years in government. Secondly, the AKP has increased its popularity in the region by providing an important message that the "Kurdish problem" was not simply an economic and security issue and the conflict could only be

effectively resolved through the democratic process.<sup>8</sup> The third element involved the common denominator of the AKP's electoral success not only in this region but across the country as a whole was active mobilization and engagement at the local level, a quality which was conspicuously absent among the other established or mainstream Turkish political parties.

Figure 5 –Distribution of Votes in the South-eastern and Eastern Regions: 2002 versus 2007



Source: Tuncer (2007)

#### 4. Turkey's Democratic Deficits: The Absence of Effective Social Democratic Opposition and its Ramifications

A key dilemma of Turkish democracy is its lopsided or one-dimensional nature. Turkish democracy is characterized by the absence of a European style center-left or social democratic party and this, in turn, constitutes an important democratic deficit and a major obstacle on the path of democratic consolidation [See Ayata & Güneş-Ayata, 2007]. What is important to

highlight in the present context is the strange transformation of the principal opposition party, the CHP, over a relatively short period of time in the aftermath of 2002 elections. The CHP has always been characterized its strong commitment to secularism and basic Republican values. However, studies based on public opinion surveys clearly indicate that the CHP in 2002 was perceived as a much more liberal entity and voters tended to identify themselves with the CHP not only on the basis of its commitment to secularism, but on the basis of its pro-Europe and pro-democratization and reform orientation [See Çarkoğlu & Kalaycıoğlu, 2007]. In the aftermath 2002, however, the party's outlook was increasingly transformed. No doubt the leadership of Deniz Baykal has played a key role in this transformation. Especially, following the departure of Kemal Derviş and his associates, the liberal elements within the party were increasingly marginalized. By 2007, in terms of its Euro-skepticism and its opposition to democratization reforms and the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish issue, the party became almost indistinguishable from the principal ultra-nationalist party in Turkey, the MHP. The politics of the CHP was increasingly based on the politics of fear and in its quest to defend secularism at all cost, the party projected the image of being prepared to sacrifice democracy in defense of Republican values. Indeed, the Party leadership clearly demonstrated its willingness to ally with the military by endorsing the “e-intervention” in April 2007 [See Özdalga, 2008]. The party leadership's clearly expressed preference for anti-democratic solutions resulted in the alienation of a large number who would normally vote for this party on the basis of its social democratic credentials. At the same time, the party leadership expressed very little interest in broader social and economic issues such as unemployment, poverty, inequality, gender discrimination, industrial restructuring and so on. Given that fundamental issues were at stake concerning the possible collapse of the secular order and demise of national sovereignty, issues such as poverty and unemployment appeared as secondary issues in the party's objective function.

What appeared to be more important for party leadership was regime-stabilization as opposed to winning a general election, a characteristic which is hardly compatible with an established and a fully consolidated democratic order where the principal objective of any political party is to win elections based on competition over alternative social and economic policies. Hence, the party leadership did not appear to be overly worried about its electoral performance in 2007. As long as the party received some 20 percent of the national vote, this would provide the party with a sufficient leverage to exercise its regime stabilizing function. By wide segments of the public opinion, however, the CHP was increasingly conceived as an elitist

project with an outdated ideology whilst the AKP appeared as progressive and society-centered at the same time. In contrast to AKP which managed to consolidate and enlarge its broad based coalition by appealing to a diverse set of interests at the same time, the CHP was increasingly marginalized to the position of being the representative of urban and secular middle classes only. The party was able to capitalize on the fears of groups who were seriously concerned about the secular credentials of the AKP and the growing conservative turn in Turkish society. Yet, it is quite striking that a significant component of those who voted for the CHP in 2007 were not happy with the way that the party was managed and the way that it was prepared to promote and strengthen the principles of secularism [See Radikal, 2007]. Indeed, there were strange instances where many individuals preferred the continuation of the AKP government in terms of its handling of the economy, but nevertheless chose to vote for the CHP based on their reservations concerning the AKP on the grounds of secularism [see Boland, 2007].

In retrospect, the failures of the CHP were important in terms of providing too much space for the governing party, the AKP, in the aftermath of the 2007 elections. The AKP emerged from the elections with an exaggerated sense of its own power and legitimacy. In the absence of effective opposition, the party was also confronted with a representational crisis. In other words, a representational overload was imposed on the AKP. The ability to forge a broad-based coalition was important in terms of its ability to win the general election capitalizing on the failures of the opposition parties. Yet, the fact that the coalition included too many diverse and conflicting interests created a new set of problems for the party leadership in the post-election context. Given the diversity of different elements and the all encompassing nature of the coalition, managing and holding this coalition together presented a new set of problems. Furthermore, the fact that the party enjoyed such a large and broad-based coalition provided the party leadership with a distorted set of signals, which resulted in miscalculations and mistakes in strategy which proved to be quite costly in terms of its impact on the ongoing democratic consolidation process.

## 5. A Missed Opportunity? The AKP in the Post-Election Context

There was an air of optimism in Turkey after the general elections of 2007. The broad expectation was that the new AKP government with its progressively more moderate and centrist credentials would help to revive the process of Europeanization and democratization reforms. Following the golden age period of 2002-2005, the AKP government had lost some of its early momentum and was unable to withstand the strong resurgence of nationalism particularly from the beginning of 2005 onwards. One should also take into account that the AKP itself is a broad coalition which includes nationalist elements. Certainly, the ambiguous signals provided by the EU, in spite of the fact that the key decision to open up negotiations with Turkey had already been taken in the December 2004 meeting of the European Council, was an important contributing factor. The fact that the EU itself was going through a major identity crisis concerning its own future and the fact that the subject of Turkey's inclusion or exclusion became embedded in the broader debates concerning Europe's own identity and the future direction of the integration process had rather negative ramifications in Turkey [see, Öniş 2008]. The constitutional stalemate in the EU coupled with the fact that the EU failed to keep its promises to citizens of Northern Cyprus in return for their positive attitude towards the peaceful resolution of the Cyprus conflict contributed to a revival of anti-European sentiments. The final blow was delivered with the partial suspension of the negotiation process in early 2006 based on Turkey's failure to satisfy its obligations to the EU in terms of opening its ports to vessels and airplanes from the Republic of Cyprus which had become a member in May 2004. Increasingly both intellectuals and the public at large were concerned about Turkey's unfair treatment and there was a steady decline in the overall public support for EU membership.<sup>9</sup> The AKP was also clearly not happy with some of the key decisions of the European Court of Human Rights which seemed to limit the domain for the extension of religious freedoms in the public space.<sup>10</sup> In this kind of atmosphere, it was perhaps inevitable that the AKP would lose its early enthusiasm for EU membership especially in the face of an impending general election. Yet, following a comfortable victory in the general election, the expectation was that the AKP was now favorably placed on embarking on a new wave of reforms which would also help to revive Turkey's push for EU membership at the same time.

The performance of the second AKP government after a few months in office, however, failed to match the favorable post-election climate. Indeed, the disappointing performance of the party in the immediate post-election helped to alienate elements of the liberal public opinion which had been quite impressed by the party's moderate and reformist stance in its early years. The AKP took a series of actions during the early months of its office in late 2007

which contributed to further polarization of Turkish society and to a parallel increase in political instability. The presidential election process involving the candidature of Abdullah Gül, a key figure in the AKP leadership and the Minister of Foreign Affairs had already caused a major political turmoil and was heavily resented by key elements of the secularist establishment. The central concern was that the election of a conservative figure like Gül to the highest layer of the state would represent a direct violation of the secular order-one of the founding principles of the Turkish Republic. The presidential election process initially ended in a stalemate. However, after July 2007, the AKP with its vastly increased majority and the additional support it enjoyed from the MHP deputies was comfortably placed to generate two thirds of the vote needed in the parliament to secure Gül's presidency. Indeed, Mr. Gül emerged as the new President in August 2007 in a relatively smooth manner especially when judged by the amount of controversy which had accompanied the announcement of his candidacy in the first place.

Having solved the presidential dilemma, the next step for the party leadership was to introduce a constitutional amendment which would remove the ban on girls who tried to enter the universities with headscarves. The AKP leadership saw this as a natural step on the path of securing what they considered to be fundamental religious freedoms. The ability to forge an alliance with the ultra-nationalist, the MHP, with a conservative posture facilitated the passage of the constitutional amendment involving the headscarf from the Parliament. The result, however, was a significant uproar from secularist segments of Turkish state and society that the AKP was increasingly coming into confrontation with the secular constitutional order. Indeed, it was the constitutional amendment involving the headscarf issue, which precipitated the Constitutional Court to take action and bring a case to close the AKP down in the early months of 2008.

In analyzing the performance of the AKP in the post-election context, we need to highlight the role of agency but also pinpoint the deeper structural processes at work. In terms of agency, one can clearly identify a case of leadership failure. The AKP leadership has clearly made a strategic mistake in terms of over-exaggerating its own power and in pushing single-mindedly for what it considered to be the fundamental religious freedoms. Forming a coalition on this issue with the ultra-nationalist MHP was also a mistake. The MHP is an interesting and paradoxical political entity in the sense that it is clearly in the defensive nationalist camp in terms of deep Euro-skepticism and its concerns over the possible threats to

the unity and sovereignty of the Turkish state. Yet, in terms of its conservatism and rural base of support, its approach to issues to “religious freedoms”, “the headscarf issue”, for instance, is broadly similar to the position of the AKP, whilst deviating sharply from the basic stance of the CHP. Clearly, an alliance with the MHP raised fundamental doubts about the moderate, reformist and the pro-European posture of the AKP. Looking back, a much more appropriate strategy in the heavily polarized political environment of Turkey would have been to push overall reform and democratization agenda as part of a revitalized Europeanization and reform process and the issue of religious freedoms could be presented as part of this broader package. Instead, the party leadership appeared to display very little interest in extending the frontiers of democratization in other areas such as a democratic resolution of the Kurdish conflict, the elimination of the article 301 (a controversial article of the Turkish penal code making it illegal to insult Turkey, Turkish ethnicity, or Turkish government) and extension of freedoms for both Muslim and non-Muslim minorities and so on.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, when a closure case was brought upon the regional-based Kurdish nationalist party, the DTP-which took place prior to the court case against the AKP- there was hardly any criticism from the AKP establishment about the possible incompatibility of party closure with a democratic regime.

Moving beyond an agency-based explanation, to broader structural factors at work, one needs to highlight the incentives and the constraints faced by the AKP leadership within the environment in which they operated. In structural terms, the AKP may be conceptualized as a broad coalition with a strong religious conservative core. This religious conservative core constitutes the dominant element in the party leadership and one of the key constituent elements of its broader electoral coalition [See Çarkoğlu & Toprak, 2007].<sup>12</sup> Given this constraint in its overall structural make-up, in spite of its moderate and reformist credentials, it would not be appropriate to conceptualize the AKP, at least in the current stage of its evolution, as a typical political party in the dominant center-right tradition of Turkish politics. Whilst the party leadership had displayed considerable pragmatism and flexibility in the early years of government, it also faced a fundamental problem in the sense that the demands of the core religious conservative constituency were being continuously postponed to some indefinite point in the future. After the elections, however, the party leadership felt that this was no longer possible and further postponement would help to alienate the party’s core group of supporters. The fact that the party captured 47 percent of the vote also provided a misleading signal that it enjoyed broad-based public support and legitimacy which would allow it to push through controversial and divisive legislation regarding the issue of religious

freedoms. Hence, the party leadership was confronted with a fundamentally structural problem in the way of trying to keep together a broad coalition of supporters whilst trying to satisfy the aspirations of its key group of supporters at the same time.

## 6. The Closure Case against the AKP and the Constitutional Court Decision in Perspective

The action on the part of the Constitutional Court to ban the AKP for its violation of secular principles based on the amendments to articles 10 and 42 of the Constitution (popularly known as headscarf amendments) represents one of the most dramatic episodes in recent Turkish political history. The decision which came as a surprise to many added to the already unstable and polarized political environment of the early 2008. Following the golden age of Europeanization and the democratization reforms of the 2002-2005 era, most observers would have thought that frequent party closures, which had been an endemic feature of the Turkish political system in the past, would be quite inconceivable at the current stage of Turkish democratic development.<sup>13</sup> The closure case against the AKP also attracted widespread attention. There were several interrelated reasons for this. First, there is no doubt that the AKP experiment in Turkey, in spite of its shortcomings, represented the most liberal or moderate face of Islamist politics throughout the Muslim world [See Ayoob, 2008; Emerson & Youngs (eds.), 2007]. In the post 9/11 global context, where establishing avenues of dialogue between the West and the Muslim world emerged as an issue of vital importance, the closure of a party would send the wrong message to many people around the world who have been following the recent Turkish experience with utmost interest. A second and related point is that party closure would imply a major blow to Turkey's aspirations to become a full member of the EU. There is no doubt that many people in Brussels, and not simply Turkey-skeptics, would regard the closure of a party which had claimed almost of the total vote, as a major violation of democratic procedures. Such an interpretation could then have a concrete impact in terms of suspending the negotiation process with the EU altogether and once such a decision had been taken it would have been very difficult to revitalize the process once again. Third, the closure of the party, independent of its ramifications in the external world, would help to destabilize the economy and contribute to the further political polarization in an environment

which had been sufficiently polarized already during the course of 2007 and 2008. Finally, if the party had been banned it would also considerably weaken the possibility of finding a democratic solution to the Kurdish problem in Turkey especially given the fact that the party which was campaigning on an ethnic nationalist platform was also confronted with a similar court case involving its possible closure. If both parties were banned, then the predominantly Kurdish region of the country would find itself in the extraordinary position of having no representatives in Parliament, which would then have the negative consequence of further radicalization of Kurdish nationalism.

In a liberal democracy, constitutional safeguards are important and a Constitutional Court may undertake actions such as closing a political party under extra-ordinary circumstances. In established or consolidated democracies, however, such cases are quite rare. In the Turkish context, a much more appropriate action would have been to start with a series of warnings before taking the major step involving party closure. This would have strengthened the case of the Constitutional Court and its claim to be an impartial institution. Fortunately, the final decision of the Constitutional Court in the summer of 2008 involved issuing a serious warning and a monetary penalty to the Party.<sup>14</sup> The fact that the party was allowed to continue injected, at least on a temporary basis, a certain degree of stability into the political system with its favorable repercussions on the state of the economy and the future of Turkey-EU relations [see Arato, 2008].

From a longer perspective, however, Turkey continues to be a polarized society and the underlying problems have not disappeared, but have been postponed to the future. One of the consequences of the Court decision might be to revitalize the push for EU membership and in the context of deepening relations with the EU, it might be easier to deal with the deeply embedded conflicts over secularism and its everyday practice. Indeed, the impact of the Europeanization process on the court decision was clearly evident. Those members of the Court who were against closure used the argument that a party which pushed through democratization reforms in line with the EU requirements, could not be accused of engaging in anti-secular activities. Having noted the importance of the EU, however, the problems are deeply embedded in the domestic sphere and cannot be solved simply on the basis of external signals or pressures. The problems cannot be solved simply by constitutional engineering either. A new constitution which provides a deeper safeguard for democratic rights and responsibilities is no doubt highly desirable. At a more fundamental level, however, there is a

need for a change of perceptions among both the conservative and the more western-oriented secular segments of society.

The AKP, with its conservative religious core, is open to criticism on the grounds that it has a narrow majoritarian and instrumental understanding of democracy and ignored the sensitivities of the secular segments of society. Certainly, if issue of religious freedoms had been presented and discussed as part of a broader project of extension of democratic rights, the controversial headscarf amendments could have generated much less resistance and a broad social consensus could have been engineered as part of this process of discussions and negotiations involving different sections of the Turkish society. Similar problems exist on the side of the secularist state establishment and secularist middle classes. The Republican rallies of the pre-election period display both an authoritarian and a democratic face. The authoritarian face involves an uncompromising attitude against the possibility of extending religious freedoms. This represents a narrow perception of secularism and provides very little space for the conservative segments in terms of their ability to participate in democratic politics. At the same time, there is a democratic and human face to these rallies which represent the genuine sensitivities of vast segments of Turkish society which are concerned with the violation of the secular political order and further Islamization of the Turkish state and the Turkish society. Clearly, there is need here for what Alfred Stepan has appropriately termed the “twin tolerations” [Stepan, 2000; Somer, 2007]. Both sides need to respect each other’s positions and concerns and a certain compromise solution needs to be found and integrated into a new constitution. The AKP leadership needs to recognize that simply obtaining a majority in Parliament will not be sufficient to generate the kind of consensus needed on highly controversial and divisive matters such as the headscarf issue. By similar logic, political parties like the CHP, in particular, and the secularist middle classes, in general, need to recognize that protecting a secular constitutional order requires more subtle strategies involving negotiation and compromise rather than a recourse to authoritarian solutions. Top-down interventionism and attempts to forge an alliance with key elements of the state establishment tend to be quite counter-productive and self-defeating as the experiences of the period leading up to the general election of July 2007 clearly testify [Ulagay, 2008].

## 7. Towards a Synthesis

What are the possible lessons that could be drawn from the recent Turkish political experience and from the AKP phenomenon in particular? For a comparative analyst, the insights that could be drawn are several.

Electoral success in the current context seems to require a positive engagement with globalization. The AKP's success was based on its progressive and modernist outlook and its ability to capitalize on the economic benefits of globalization to forge a broad based electoral coalition which included rising middle classes as well as poorer segments of society. In contrast, parties like the CHP or the MHP, which adopted a largely defensive and negative attitude towards globalization and based their strategies on the fears and concerns of certain groups in society failed to establish the kind of broad based coalition needed for election success. Class-based politics does not work in a globalized environment. The CHP, largely a representative of urban and secular middle class segments of Turkish society, and the MHP, as a representative of rural poor, highlight the limits to the success of political parties oriented towards specific segments of society.

A pro-globalization approach is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for political success. The ability to engage with the local society and its core values is equally important. The AKP's "conservative globalism" represents a successful synthesis of the global and the local. The AKP has effectively managed to develop a strategy based on an unusual and paradoxical synthesis which allowed it to project a progressive and modern outlook combined with a concern of the sensitivities and core values of large segments of society. It is perhaps this very synthesis of the global and the local, in other words a global strategy embedded in the local, that explains its broad appeal, an element which its principal competitors have failed to match.

Turkey's post-2002 AKP experience represents perhaps the closest representation of "liberal Islam" that we see anywhere in the Muslim world. As a political party with an explicit Islamist heritage, it has been significantly transformed in the direction of a typical conservative party in the tradition of the center-right parties which have a dominant feature of the Turkish party system ever since the inception of the multi-party era in 1950. Yet, the recent experience and post-election dynamics clearly pinpoint the limits of liberal Islam and

the underlying tensions between the globalist and conservative elements. One could argue that as long as the party elite continues to consist of the religious conservative core, a structural limit to the party's ability to converge to the dominant center-right tradition in Turkish politics will remain.. It will also place a structural limit to the party leadership's ability to push for Europeanization and democratization reforms. The tensions between the conservative and the liberal-globalist elements have clearly come to the surface in the post-election context. It is these underlying tensions which explain why many liberals who tended to support the AKP on the basis of its reformist stance have been increasingly dissatisfied and alienated on the basis of its recent performance.

Turkey's recent political crises also highlight the importance of effective opposition in a well-functioning democracy. The weaknesses of the opposition parties in Turkey and the absence of a European style left of center alternative has created a representational vacuum at the very center of Turkish politics. This in turn has resulted in a kind of one-party dominant system which placed an overload on the governing party, the AKP. Building a broad-based coalition consisting of highly diverse elements helped by the weakness of the opposition was at the heart of the AKP's electoral success. Yet, in the post-election context, the ability to manage this coalition proved to be far more difficult than it was originally anticipated. Furthermore, the extraordinary share of the total vote provided the wrong kind of signal to the party leadership that they could press ahead with their primary agenda, namely the extension of religious freedoms, on the assumption that they enjoyed broad legitimacy and public support. This assumption was also based on a narrow, majoritarian understanding of democracy and it proved to be the wrong assumption. Obtaining a comfortable majority in parliament was not a sufficient condition for effective governance in a highly polarized society. The AKP's electoral success proved to be its ultimate weakness. Perhaps if the party had faced better opposition which no doubt would also limit the magnitude of its electoral coalition, the party leadership could have pursued a more pragmatic strategy based on negotiation and compromise and the kind of serious political instability that Turkey has experienced in 2007 and 2008 could have been avoided in the process.

Ending on an optimistic note, Turkey is still not a fully consolidated democracy, but the democratic regime is showing signs of maturity. Turkish democracy has been transformed in a fundamental manner over the past decade, a process clearly facilitated by the impact of the European Union. The AKP, for example, still displays elements of its Islamist heritage. Yet, it

is a far more moderate and centrist party compared with its predecessor of the Welfare Party of the mid-1990s. The fact that an e-intervention by the military could take place in 2007 is rather troubling. At the same, the military itself has undergone certain transformation and certainly the full-scale military interventions of the past no longer appear feasible in the current political conjuncture. The fact that the Constitutional Court could bring a closure case against the ruling party is also a cause for concern. Yet, the Constitutional Court did not actually ban the party and this is a sign that problems or conflicts could be resolved by more subtle means which may also be interpreted a sign of maturity representing a break with the past where party closure appeared to be a normal feature of Turkish democracy. Clearly, there is a long way to go in terms of securing the kinds of compromises needed to overcome Turkey's perennial problems. Recent developments are both disconcerting and offer avenues for hope at the same time.

\* Professor of International Relations at Koç University, Istanbul, Turkey. The author would like to thank anonymous referees of the Journal, Reşat Bayer and Jeff Dixon for their valuable comments. The able assistance of Ismail Emre Bayram and Erkinalp Kesikli is gratefully acknowledged.

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<sup>1</sup> Kemal Derviş is an eminent economist who previously served as the Vice President of the World Bank and incumbent head of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). He was appointed as the Minister of Economy between 2001 and 2002 and he was the policy entrepreneur who mainly designed and implemented the economic recovery program of Turkey after the 2001 crisis. Hence, he played a critical role in the process of economic and political stabilization in the post-2001 context.

<sup>2</sup> AKP's social policy mainly targeted to help the poor through informal channels. Their approach was driven by a mixture of ideological and pragmatic considerations. The ideological element was clearly based on notions of justice and equality underlying the party's Islamist heritage. The pragmatic element was a reflection of the need to win popular support in an environment where formal means of redistribution were restricted by budgetary constraints associated with an on-going IMF program. Particularly striking in this context was the distribution of food and coal to actual and potential supporters of the party on a selective basis.

<sup>3</sup> AKP's reformist image had a wide appeal among society. According to a recent survey report, at least 44% and at most 57% of the respondents stated that certain things had changed during the AKP government. Again, at least 55% and at most 67% of respondents perceived the change in Turkish economy, relations with the EU and Turkish politics in a positive way. For further information on the survey results and an analysis of religion, society and politics in Turkey, see Çarkoğlu & Toprak (2007).

<sup>4</sup> It is important to highlight a major difference between the two main opposition parties, the CHP and the MHP, The positions of the two parties are fundamentally similar in terms of their perceptions of the threats to the unity and sovereignty of the Turkish state. As regards to the the secularism issue, however, the position of the MHP tends to be much closer to the position of the AKP.

<sup>5</sup> E-intervention, phrase commonly used in the media to reflect the online nature of warning, took place during the presidential election process. The military has issued a warning over the internet objecting to the possible election of a key AKP figure with an Islamist background, Abdullah Gül, as the president. Similar concerns were voiced in a series of 'Republican' Rallies which took place in a number of Turkish states during spring 2007 whereby a large number of people have protested against the alleged anti-secular activities of the AKP.

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<sup>6</sup> For evidence, see Çarkoğlu & Toprak (2007). The comparison of RP and AKP clearly indicates that the latter one is perceived by many respondents to be more committed to democracy. While 42% of the respondents disagreed that RP was committed to democracy, 25.9% disagreed with AKP's commitment.

<sup>7</sup> For a brief overview of Turkish electoral system and November 2002 elections, see Çarkoğlu (2002).

<sup>8</sup> Prime Minister Erdoğan made an important speech in Diyarbakir in August 2005 where he explicitly recognized the need to address the "Kurdish Question" and acknowledged past "mistakes" committed by the Turkish authorities against the Kurdish minority.

<sup>9</sup> On the question of "fairness" in Turkey-EU relations, see Aydın & Keyman (2004). For evidence on the decline of EU membership, see Euractiv.com (2008). The overall public support for EU membership has dropped from a peak of 67 percent in 2004 to 32 percent in 2007.

<sup>10</sup> In the case of Leyla Şahin versus Turkey of June 2004, the European Court of Human Rights decided in favor of Turkey. The banning of headscarves at the University of Istanbul did not violate Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

<sup>11</sup> Admittedly, certain steps have been undertaken to modify the notorious article 301 of the penal code and new legislation has been introduced to protect the rights of the non-Muslim minorities. However, these measures have been implemented in a rather defensive and lukewarm manner. Given its broad mandate, the government could have taken more radical steps such as abolishing the article 301 of the penal code altogether. The opening of the Halki Seminary could also have represented a major move in terms of recognizing the rights of Christian minorities.

<sup>12</sup> The demands of the religious conservative core should not be interpreted as support for an Iran style Islamic state or the adoption of the Islamic law. What it means is more freedom in the public space for an Islamic or conservative life style. Public opinion surveys indicate that the majority of people in Turkey do not have the perception that secularism is under threat, nor does it support the establishment of a theocratic state in Turkey.

<sup>13</sup> Altogether twenty-four parties have been banned from politics over the course of the multi-party era. There is currently an on-going court case against the DTP where a decision is expected in the near future.

<sup>14</sup> The decision was a close one with six members of the Court out of a total of eleven voting in favor of closure. If seven had voted in favor of closure, then the party would have been banned from politics.

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