

# MERIA

## OPPOSITION FOR THE SAKE OF OPPOSITION? POLARIZED PLURALISM IN TURKISH POLITICS

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*This article examines the current state of Turkish politics and the positions of the two main opposition parties—the Republican People’s Party and Nationalist Action Party—on the major issues. The article argues that rather than formulating alternative sociopolitical and economic policies, both opposition parties partake in a merely partisan debate. This in turn partly discredits them as engaging in unconstructive criticism for their own political gain.*

Since the 2002 general elections, the Turkish political scene has been dominated by intense competition between the governing Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi, AKP) and the two main opposition parties, the Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP) and the Nationalist Action Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP).

In the 2007 general elections, the incumbent AKP managed to win and increase its vote share significantly. Though it lost some ground, the AKP also did fairly well in the 2009 local elections. The AKP, CHP, and MHP are likely to continue dominating the Turkish political scene in the upcoming 2011 election cycle.

**Table 1: Percentage of votes won by parties in current parliament in general and local elections: 2002-2009<sup>1</sup>**

	2002 General Elections	2004 Local Elections	2007 General Elections	2009 Local Elections
AKP	34.3 %	41.7%	46.6%	38.4%
CHP	19.4%	18.2%	20.9%	23.1%
MHP	8.4%	10.5%	14.3%	16.0%
DTP*	-	-	-	5.7%

\* Democratic Society Party (Demokratik Toplum Partisi, DTP) competed as the DEHAP in the 2002 general elections and failed to pass the 10 percent threshold, receiving 6.2 percent of the votes. In the 2007 general elections, DTP candidates bypassed the threshold by running as independents and forming a group following their election.<sup>2</sup>

This article provides a general analysis of the state of the contemporary Turkish political scene. A key question is whether AKP domination will continue for the long haul or whether the CHP and MHP can pose a serious enough challenge in order to take power.

Rapid developments on the Turkish political scene have made for a political agenda that is changing on an almost monthly basis. Moreover, as new issues arise they seem

to be increasingly controversial. For example, in August 2009, the governing AKP announced it was working on a major initiative to solve the long-running Kurdish issue. Although the initiative’s details were not officially announced, a serious and intense debate erupted both at the mass and elite levels.

The mounting tension on many fronts has generated increased talk of possible early

elections in late 2010, a year earlier than scheduled. As political analyst Adil Gur suggests, there are four possible factors that could lead to early elections.<sup>3</sup>

The first is the Kurdish initiative. By launching a debate on the issue, the AKP has raised expectations that would be difficult to meet without extensive reforms and even constitutional changes. Yet considering the harsh criticism from the CHP and MHP on the issue, and the pro-Kurdish DTP's constant demands, it is unlikely the AKP will undertake any radical changes--which could prove unpopular--before the elections.

On the one hand, significant elements in the ethnic Turkish majority could view concessions to the Kurds as giving up more than they want and might shift to the CHP or MHP. On the other hand, Kurdish voters--who constitute an important part of the AKP majority--could view such reforms as insufficient and could opt to vote for the DTP instead. The AKP might thus prefer winning another election victory before moving forward with such reforms.

A second possible factor is the economic situation. The AKP is well aware that the negative effects of global financial crisis have caused the party some loss in electoral support. Both the 2007 general elections and the 2009 local elections demonstrated that economic considerations are very powerful determinants of voting behavior in Turkey. If the economic situation were to deteriorate further by 2011, this could hurt the AKP's chance of reelection. Thus, early elections could be in the AKP's interests.

The third possible factor that could lead to early elections is the lack of any new party or force entering the political competition. Although there have been small initiatives, such as the populist movement of Mustafa Sarigul (formerly of the CHP), they are far from being organized enough and having sufficient resources to pose any real threat. In this respect, it is in the AKP's interest to hold election before any new unity or strong opposition force arises.

The fourth and final factor is the weakness of the opposition. While both the CHP and

MHP hope to attract disappointed AKP voters, both parties, in particular the CHP, have failed to offer credible alternative policy options on major socioeconomic issues. Neither has thus succeeded to garner greater support. Early elections would then be to the AKP's advantage so as not to provide the opportunity for the MHP or CHP to become better organized, develop alternative policy options, and thus win over disillusioned AKP voters.

Another major issue in Turkey has been the role of military in politics. On June 26, 2009, at a late night session, the parliament passed a law that granting civilian courts the power to prosecute army officers. The law was a cornerstone in removing the extensive military immunity left over from the 1980 military coup and the constitution that reflects that period.

In addition, after two years of relative passivity on the AKP's part, it demonstrated the party's eagerness for reforms regarding key aspects of Turkish society. CHP parliament members voted in favor of the change but later claimed they had been tricked by its wording. They called for the Constitutional Court's intervention to annul the law as being against the constitution. In retaliation to this CHP move, the AKP launched a major public campaign portraying itself as defenders of democracy and the CHP as a non-democratic, statist and pro-military party.

The AKP followed this reform by bringing another controversial issue to the table. From late July 2009, the government's announcement of plans for a series of reforms to address the Kurdish issue dominated the Turkish political scene, becoming the top issue on all the parties' agendas.

## **THE KURDISH INITIATIVE DEBATE AND THE OPPOSITION PARTIES**

While the main points and details of the AKP's proposed Kurdish initiative have yet to be disclosed, there has been a constant and heated debate since the government's

declaration of the plan. The name of the initiative has also changed several times, first called the Kurdish Initiative (Kurt Acilimi), then the Democratic Initiative, followed by the National Unity Project.

Since the 2007 general elections campaign, the CHP and MHP have attempted to mobilize voters by discrediting the AKP as a threat to the basic and fundamental principles of the Turkish Republic and to national integrity. While the CHP mainly presented this in the form of a threat to secularism and individual liberties during the 2007 election period and after, the Kurdish initiative presented a new opportunity for both parties, and the CHP and MHP have since shifted from a strategy of threat perception to an emphasis on national integrity.

CHP leader Deniz Baykal argued that they would not comment or declare blind support for such an initiative without knowing its contents. However, as time passed, the CHP began categorically opposing the plan, placing greater emphasis on the potential danger that such an initiative would divide the country. On numerous occasions, the CHP has referred to the plan as being “imported” or “imposed.” During Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan’s visit to the United States for the UN General Assembly meeting, in particular, the CHP stressed this point, making numerous statements claiming this was an initiative of the United States.

Rather than providing concrete policy proposals, the CHP and its leadership focused all of their efforts on emphasizing the threat to the country’s territorial integrity. On a few occasions, Baykal referred to a 1989 report prepared by the CHP’s predecessor, the Social Democratic People’s Party (Sosyal Demokrat Halkci Partisi, SHP), on the Kurdish issue. The report envisaged a comprehensive set of personal and ethnic rights and freedoms for Kurds living in Turkey. By referring to the report, Baykal attempted to establish that the CHP was the original champion of Kurdish rights and liberties.

Indeed, SHP’s Kurdish report was comprehensive and much beyond its times. Yet Baykal’s recent stand and rhetoric have

been far more conservative than the positions presented in the 1989 report. Tarhan Erdem, prominent researcher and former general secretary of the CHP, argues that Baykal was part of the opposition within the SHP at the time of the writing of the report and claims that Baykal actually objected to its contents.<sup>4</sup>

The CHP is clearly trying to mobilize anti-AKP votes by constantly opposing any initiative by the AKP as a part of its electoral strategy. However, this could cause the party to lose votes from its own base of social democratic and liberal voters who are more sensitive to individual and ethnic liberties and rights. Yet on the other hand, some CHP voters appear to be in line with the CHP leadership’s views on the controversial issues, especially the Kurdish issue. Following the AKP’s decision to launch TRT 6, Turkey’s first national Kurdish-language television station, in January 2009, the CHP and MHP were critical since the use of the Kurdish language publicly had long been opposed by nationalists. An opinion poll conducted at the time revealed that 59.1 percent of CHP voters and 70.1 percent of MHP voters disapproved of such a channel.<sup>5</sup>

The MHP’s reaction to the Kurdish initiative was far more radical. At an August 2, 2009 press conference, MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli stated that the Kurdish initiative of the AKP government would only serve the outlawed Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK), which had resorted to terrorist tactics in order to reach its goal of establishing an independent Kurdish state. This was in line with the MHP’s traditional position as a Turkish ethnic nationalist party opposing any hint of Kurdish rights and liberties as a sign of separatism. He further declared that the MHP ranks were ready to take up an armed struggle and “go to mountains to fight.”<sup>6</sup>

#### **PUBLIC OPINION ON THE KURDISH ISSUE**

While party leaders were exchanging salvos on the issue, a comprehensive opinion poll on the citizens' attitudes toward the Kurdish initiative was conducted.<sup>7</sup> The results were particularly striking. While 48.1 percent of the respondents indicated that they supported the government's Kurdish initiative, 36.4 percent said they had a negative opinion regarding such an initiative. When the respondents were asked to evaluate the CHP's policy on the initiative, 63.5 percent expressed a negative opinion and only 15.6 percent expressed a positive opinion. The high percentage of "don't knows," 21 percent, was also significant.

Among those who define themselves as CHP voters, the support for CHP's position was only 33 percent among respondents of Turkish origin and 23.3 percent among respondents of Kurdish origin. Negative evaluations of CHP policy by CHP voters was 47.4 percent among respondents of Turkish origin and 57.5 percent among respondents of Kurdish origin. These figures indicate that the CHP's voting base has not been very satisfied with the party's policies. However, this does not mean that there is a rift between the CHP leadership and its voting base. The same survey indicated that 43.8 percent of CHP voters of Turkish origin stated they agreed with the opposition parties that such an initiative should be considered as "separatist." This demonstrates that the threat perception of the CHP is accepted and shared among some of its voters.

On the other hand, MHP voters have become increasingly united and closer to their leadership's positions. Compared with their CHP counterparts, MHP voters have a more positive opinion regarding the party's actions and discourse, with 40.4 percent of MHP voters indicating they find their party's position on the issue positive.

It is possible that the AKP might lose some votes to the strong nationalist stand of the MHP and even the CHP. Yet to what degree and how much of it would be compensated by the Kurdish votes gained is difficult to estimate at this stage. This will heavily depend

upon the level of satisfaction of Kurdish citizens from the reforms.

In the March 2009 local elections, aside from the Kurdish-identified DTP, the AKP remained the only major party with significant vote potential in the southeastern and eastern parts of Turkey, where the majority of Kurds live. Votes for the CHP and MHP in this area remained below 10 percent. The CHP and MHP are also likely to lose additional votes in these regions due to their strong opposition to reforms on the Kurdish issue. Thus most voters in these regions would likely vote either for the AKP or the DTP.

The DTP is the only opposition party that has openly supported the Kurdish initiative. However, there is still a potential risk for the AKP stemming from the DTP's discourse, which continues to raise the bar, calling for radical changes in the constitution. If the DTP manages to create very high expectations, this could leave the AKP in a very difficult position, as the CHP's and MHP's constant and strong opposition would certainly limit the extent of the reforms. However, if AKP succeeds in reaching a satisfactory position on this initiative that would satisfy moderate elements, it would have huge potential gains in the upcoming elections.

### **CHP: STUCK IN OPPOSITION?**

As the founding party of modern Turkey, the CHP has been subjected to severe criticism both from within its own ranks and by others due to its failure to gain power. With the AKP in government, the CHP's opposition tactics and methods have been considered inadequate. Under the leadership of the generally unpopular Deniz Baykal, the CHP has been portrayed by critics as a party incapable of producing alternative ideas and expressing opposition to AKP initiatives for merely partisan reasons, regardless of the issue.

The most repeated criticism has been that by polarizing almost all political issues, the CHP has attempted to create binary categories, i.e., secularism versus religious fundamentalism, republican versus separatist, patriot versus traitor.<sup>8</sup> Sinan Ciddi further

argues that the CHP's major weakness has been its inability to adapt and internalize ideological change and its failure to tune in the preferences and priorities of voters.<sup>9</sup>

H. Bulent Kahraman asserts that the CHP is rejoining the Turkish historical ruling bloc. According to his analysis, during the mid-1960s, the CHP broke away from the historical bloc that had been the leading force of Turkish modernization in the early years of the republic to reinvent itself as a left-oriented party. However, Kahraman also claims that with rise of conservative political forces in late 1990s, and especially with AKP dominance beginning in 2002, the historical bloc was reformed, albeit it was much weaker; the CHP positioned itself within this bloc along with the military, certain intellectuals, and the bureaucracy.<sup>10</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

The AKP has skillfully used the strategy of the opposing parties, especially the CHP, to portray itself as a victim. It has carefully projected the image of a liberal democratic party attempting to carry out major reforms and facilitate progress but constantly facing obstacles created by the opposition. The Kurdish issue is the most recent example. Without even providing any information about the content of its initiative, the AKP has managed to create a debate and launch an attack on the opposition.

The CHP leadership is well aware of the fact that their chances of winning an election and forming a government are rather slim. Voter support for the CHP has been around 20 percent since 2000. Considering the unlikelihood of forming a coalition with the MHP within the context of current issues, the CHP's goal appears to be to remain the main opposition party and preserve its own voter base. It appears that the CHP's current leadership is content with its strategy and will seek out ways to sustain the threat perception in the upcoming elections.

The party's main line of argument has shifted from the debate over secularism versus political Islam to the Kurdish issue. The CHP,

which has positioned itself as defender of the secular lifestyle and protector of the republic's secular principles, is now placing greater emphasis on defending the territorial unity of the country against potential Kurdish separatism. Such a shift of emphasis has brought the CHP much closer to the MHP's position. This potentially places the two parties in competition for the non-AKP vote.

With regard to future elections, Ali Carkoglu has demonstrated that the economy was a major determinant in the 2007 general elections and the 2009 local elections.<sup>11</sup> With the effects of the global financial crisis increasingly felt in Turkey, the AKP's economic performance in government will be a very important element aside from ideological cleavages. The unemployment rate, for instance, rose to 15 percent in January 2009 from 11.6 percent the previous year, compared to seven percent in Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) member countries.<sup>12</sup>

The AKP thus faces a very difficult task until the next general elections: The party has to satisfy the moderate Kurdish and Turkish voters by carrying out effective democratic reforms; meet the expectations of their core conservative base, while being careful not to alienate or antagonize the sensitive secular electorate; in addition and above all, the AKP must achieve good economic performance. As Joseph Schumpeter has noted, elections not only offer citizens an opportunity to give their verdict on who should govern, but also on how they have been treated by their governors since the previous election.<sup>13</sup> Given the lack of a clear policy profile by the CHP and MHP, it is highly likely that the upcoming elections will be predominantly based on voters' evaluation of AKP performance.

According to a September 2009 opinion poll, despite some decline in support, the AKP remained the dominant party in Turkish politics, receiving 34.44 percent support among those polled. In comparison, CHP support increased over a six month period (from March 2009 to September 2009) from 23 to 27.2 percent, apparently benefiting from moving to the right in nationalist terms. The

same poll showed an increase in support for the MHP as well, which went from about 16 percent support in March 2009 to 19 percent in September 2009.<sup>14</sup>

However, the dynamism of the Turkish political scene makes it difficult to make concrete projections. Even in the absence of new controversial issues emerging, the Kurdish initiative alone promises to be a divisive issue, which could still impact voter behavior.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Table reproduced from Banu Eligur, "Turkey's March 2009 Local Elections," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3, pp. 469-96.

<sup>2</sup> On December 11, 2009, in an unanimous decision, Turkey's Constitutional Court decided to disband the DTP due to its links with the outlawed PKK. The decision was made in accordance with Articles 68 and 69 of the constitution. Party leader Ahmet Turk and MP Aysel Tugluk were barred from politics for five years, losing their seats as MPs. The remaining MPs of the DTP formed a new group under the newly established Peace and Democracy Party (Baris ve Demokrasi Partisi, BDP). For sake of clarity, the acronym DTP has been kept in the article.

<sup>3</sup> Adil Gur, "AKP Hizla Oy Kaybedecek" ["AKP Will Lose Votes Rapidly"], Interview, *Vatan*, October 10, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Tarhan Erdem, *Taraf*, August 17, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> *Milliyet*, February 9, 2009, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/Guncel/HaberDetay.aspx?aType=HaberDetay&Kategori=guncel&KategoriID=&ArticleID=1057280&Date=09.02.2009&b=Vatandas,%20acilimleri%20sami%20bulmadi&ver=74>.

<sup>6</sup> "MHP daga cikmaya hazir" ["MHP Is Ready to Go to the Mountains"], *Hurriyet*, August 2, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> SETA and POLLMARK, *Turkiye'nin Kurt Sorunu Algisi [Public Perception of the Kurdish Question in Turkey]* (Ankara: SETAV, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Sinan Ciddi, "The Republican People's Party and the 2007 General Elections: Politics of Perpetual Decline?," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (2008), p. 445.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pp. 444-48.

<sup>10</sup> Hasan Bulent Kahraman, *Turk Siyasetinin Yapisal Analizi-I [Structural Analysis of Turkish Politics]* (Istanbul: Agora, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Ali Carkoglu, "Ideology or Economic Pragmatism: Profiling Turkish Voters in 2007," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (June 2008), pp. 317-44; and Ali Carkoglu, "Turkey's Local Elections of 2009: Winners and Losers," *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Spring 2009), pp. 1-18.

<sup>12</sup> OECD Harmonized Unemployment Rates, April 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1952).

<sup>14</sup> SONAR, September 2009 survey, reported in *Aksam*, October, 4, 2009.