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Apparatchiks and Ideologues in Islamist Turkey

The Intellectual Order of Islamism and Populism

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PERMISSIONS

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Introduction: The AKP's Intellectual Order and Political Technology in Comparative Perspectives

Abstract This chapter presents a comparative perspective on the intellectual order of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) that situates it alongside other contemporaneous, populist-authoritarian regimes. What distinguishes these from the autocracies of pre-Third-Wave democratization period is their claim to represent the people. They are hybrid regimes shorn of ideology that instead assume electoral support as the anchor of their legitimacy. This requires a malleable mixture of discourses to assemble a populist mélange. AKP-aligned intellectuals thus function as apparatchiks in an order of political technology. Nevertheless, the AKP and its leadership cannot be simply depicted as populist because it builds on an ideological core. The comparative perspective thus requires attention to the Islamist roots of the party.

Keywords Populism • Islamism • Competitive authoritarianism • Authoritarianism • Secularism • Political technology

While some intellectuals were optimistic upon the coming to power in 2002 of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) that the party's rule would not bring Islamization, others remained skeptical, arguing that the tolerant airs and liberal vistas were merely calculated moves and window dressing. The Islamic concept of *takiyah* was shown as the theological base of this hypocritical behavior. *Takiyah* allowed

Muslims to conceal their beliefs to be able to survive in hostile circumstances. Showing theological reasoning rather than political pragmatism as the reason for the dissimulation displayed a propensity to assume that the AKP and Islamist politics operated entirely or at least primarily in compliance with Islamic norms, commands, and worldview, which remain solid, all-encompassing, and inflexible over time. Such essentialism, on the other hand, was condemned by pro-AKP liberal intellectuals as itself cynical, biased, Islamophobic, and failing to recognize Islamic pluralities.

The first years of AKP government afforded evidence for the latter view. However, the AKP's reformism and enthusiasm for accession to the EU ebbed, its haphazard "Democratic Opening" came too little, and instead, the party leadership became increasingly authoritarian and gravitated to populist discourses amalgamating populism with Islamism. The triumphalism subsequent to the elimination of military defiance led to an authoritarian turn corroborating the worst nightmares of the aghast seculars. This worst-case scenario, however, was conspicuously different from what the seculars had imagined for the last three decades.

DISCOURSE AND POWER

In Turkey, the ghoul of Islamic takeover had initially appeared quite abruptly following the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979. This scare proliferated throughout the 1990s (Navaro, 2002, 46–55; Özyürek, 2006). Iranian affiliation behind a number of assassinations of secular intellectuals in the early 1990s reinforced this scare. Iran itself became a buzzword for the religious rollback of everything gained in the decades of the Republic and the looming threat of medieval darkness. It was the definitive symbol of the ultimate dystopia the Islamists were committed to impose. In 1993, the notorious assassination and then funeral of Uğur Mumcu, an investigative socialist journalist well-known for his uncompromising secularist views, became a moment that traumatized a generation. It stirred seculars' deepest forebodings. The mournful, furious, but also sober and unyielding huge crowd in his funeral in Ankara passionately chanting "Turkey will not be an Iran!" stood against the deeply felt Islamic threat.

Addressing and amplifying the qualms of the Turkish female reading public, Betty Mahmoody's bestseller autobiographical novel *Not Without My Daughter* (1987) had become an immediate bestseller in Turkey upon its translation in 1991. *Not Without My Daughter* told the fearful story of a mother who found herself hostage in Iran in the wake of the Islamic

Revolution and fleeing from her abruptly radicalized abusive husband with her daughter. The phrase “Becoming Iran” meant the immediate imposition of obligatory hijab, dismantling of all women’s rights, imprisoning of women at home, and Islamic patrols monitoring Islamic prohibitions.

The other heavily loaded keyword in circulation was “shariah” (*şeriat*), which encompassed and encapsulated the trajectory of the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution. This imagery inferred a clear-cut dichotomy between secularism and shariah, not allowing any hybrid, in-between forms. In 2006, four years into the AKP period, a controversial and highly popular television advertisement was run by the staunchly secular (Kemalist) newspaper *Cumhuriyet* that called on the public to be watchful and on guard against the creeping introduction of shariah. This advert dramatically employed the poignant themes of Arabic script and forcibly veiled women, of “republican women” suddenly subjugated to Islamic and male oppression (Kongar, 2006). It used background music that evoked a Middle Eastern eeriness and ended with the rhetorical question, “Are you beware of the danger?” (*Tehlikenin farkında mısınız?*).¹ The TV ad was criticized for “selling fear” and exploiting an orientalist imagery (Aydın, 2006). Six years later, after recounting a number of Islamizing measures of the AKP, *Cumhuriyet* columnist Ali Sirmen (2012) disparaged liberals for innocently and stupidly whitewashing the AKP:

Even after all these moves of AKP, a few imbeciles continue to absentmindedly disbelieve that Turkey can be the next Iran. These liberals assured that Turkey will not be an Iran with their typical idiotic overconfidence.

Yet, as the AKP consolidated its grip on power around that time, things unfolded quite differently. Against the likes of Sirmen, pro-AKP liberals had long derided the seculars and public intellectuals, arguing that despite all their fury and anguish, their lives were barely affected and they still enjoyed the privileges of their exclusive neighborhoods (Gürpınar, 2016: 353–84; Arat-Koç, 2018). Such apologetics could not come to terms with the fact that seculars’ sense of marginalization stemmed not from the

¹Two more ads were produced in different styles but ending with the same rhetorical; for a video of all three versions, see <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/video/cumhuriyet-gazetesi-tehlikenin-farkinda-misiniz-36012324>.

blatant outlawing of their lifestyle (as in the archetypical case of Iran) or its drastic constraint but from the declining space in which to express their opinions (Toprak, 2012). Already by the late 2000s, secular voices were being excluded from the public space and their worries and passions rendered inaudible. They were distraught since the state was no more a trusted entity in line with the Kemalist faith in its progressive modernist republicanism, but, on the contrary, perceived as a hostile instrument of oppression that discriminated against them and their secular way of life. This course was surely not a rerun of the Iranian trajectory. While not exactly replicating or resembling the Iranian historical precedent, however, the AKP turned increasingly authoritarian, gradually repressing the expression of self, identity, and opinion in the public space, first that of the seculars and, in time, among the disapproving conservatives, too, who were, indeed, regarded as closer threats and often more harshly treated. Islamization and Islamic display were forcefully introduced as the new hegemony. Yet again, those Islamic networks that did not subjugate to the state were also wrecked, their piety unable to protect them. This hybridity of the authoritarian drift was also reflected in its accompanying epistemic regime.

After its third consecutive landslide victory in general elections in 2011, the AKP was characterized as controlling the “majority of the parliament, local governments, and the presidency in an increasingly stable party system with reduced electoral volatility and party-switching” (Gümüşçü, 2013: 223). This course was related to the Western patterns in Gümüşçü’s (ibid.: 224) analysis of party systems:

The AKP conforms to the trend of predominant parties in more advanced democracies and follows a complex strategy that sustains the party’s political dominance. Like the Christian Democrats in Italy, Liberal Democrats in Japan, and Social Democrats in Sweden, the AKP has established a ‘virtuous cycle’ of dominance.

Others also opted for this categorization (e.g., Çarkoğlu, 2011; Aslan-Akman, 2012; Ayan-Musil, 2015). The AKP, however, changed gears as it became increasingly authoritarian and came to act resolutely not to allow any incumbent change via the ballot box. This marked the moment of its “authoritarian turn” (Somer, 2016; Sözen, 2019). Esen and Gümüşçü (2016: 1583) suggested that “competitive authoritarianism better captures the complexity of ongoing regime change in Turkey than do several

types of defective democracy (e.g., delegative, electoral, majoritarian, plebiscitarian or illiberal).” Likewise, Çınar (2018) framed AKP as a “hegemonic party” that incapacitated political contestation and assured the persistence of its political power, rendering elections as mere procedure through its control over financial means, media outlets, and one-sided state propaganda capacities.

Many reasons have been offered for the demise of democracy in Turkey, such as the weakness of civil society, fragility of state institutions, lack of a democratic culture, and Islam and Islamism (Lord, 2018: 4). Personalism, particularly after the 2017 transition to a presidential system, is shown as another major reason for this process (Rhodes-Purdy & Madrid, 2020). The populist authoritarianism of the AKP also expressed a global trend, defying conventional terminology and categorizations that distinguish democracies and authoritarian regimes as in the pre-Third-Wave democratization world. Therefore, the subject needs to be examined comparatively, along with its mechanisms of ideological backing.

The post-Soviet liberal triumphalism of the 1990s ebbed during the 2000s. Hybrid regimes became the norm in many regions. The newly prevalent regime type of competitive authoritarianism was not made up of blatant dictatorships. Its constitutions and laws allowed oppositional political parties. Yet, in practice, no sizeable room existed to change the incumbent party (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2006). Further to this, the 2010s witnessed the rise of populism that introduced a new mode of governance. Whereas populism in the Western democracies voiced dissent and protest, in the non-consolidated democracies, where institutions were much more vulnerable, it implied a novel way of governance. Denouncing the establishment and “elites” and depicting the state as the instrument of the powerful and privileged, the new populism ushered in a new mode of politics wherein the leader as *vox populi* was empowered and claimed the power to defy norms, bully bureaucracies, and ignore institutions, cultures of negotiation and consensus, and even laws (Moffitt, 2016a, 2016b; Müller, 2016; Finchelstein, 2017; Norris, 2019).

This populism did not and does not offer a contesting ideology because it rejects ideology per se and instead offers an alternative to party politics and democracy as we knew it. AKP rule and its leader Erdoğan followed the populist-authoritarian mode observed worldwide from Poland under the Law and Justice Party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) and Hungary under Victor Orbán to Narendra Modi and Jair Bolsonaro in the developing world. Its epistemic universe also resembled that of the hybrid regimes.

Charting its own course attuned to the local terrain, this blend amalgamated a twentieth-century Islamicate universe with the twenty-first-century post-truth regime. What emerged, therefore, was a uniquely Islamic epistemic matrix underwriting populist authoritarianism and personalization of power.

This book explores that episteme, the worlds of the intelligentsia aligned with the Turkish governing party AKP. It examines different modes of apologetics delivered in the service of the AKP government as pursued by different constellations of AKP-aligned intellectuals and the milieus in which they operated. It treats these intellectuals not as articulating their genuine opinions but as apparatchiks playing a structural and functional role in the dynamic power matrix. It maintains that their apologetics operate as *political technology* that seeks to inform, guide, and justify what should be thought, said, and imagined and determine which words and images are permitted and which conceptual constellations are used.

This pattern is aligned to that of semi-authoritarian or competitive authoritarian regimes and thus offers a comparative perspective. Several studies examining the political milieus in the post-Soviet authoritarian regimes have examined the fields of intellectuality, public intellectuality, and the media controlled and manipulated by the state as extension zones of statecraft. This involves the range of ideas, personalities, and internal and external clashes and syntheses that make up the totality of the domain of ideas within the context of a restrictive environment. The organization and mechanisms of intellectual backing in populist and authoritarian governments show a recurrent pattern.

The debates on populism are also relevant. Becoming a buzzword among political scientists in the last decade, the definition of populism remains elusive. Populism leans on an uncompromising anti-elitism blended with an anti-liberal and anti-establishment discourse. This essentially negative ontology does not build on a consistent set of premises and adds up to a coherent worldview. Thus, what tends to emerge is an ad hoc, hotchpotch of rhetorical arguments and improvised and/or devised ploys and maneuvers. The AKP-aligned apparatchik intellectuals certainly make use of the emotive and discursive arsenal of populism. The Islamic vocabulary is also freely employed for this populism's playbook. Islamism is an essential part of the ideological makeup of the AKP. This is an Islamism heavily reappropriated for the necessities of the regime, but it still retains the basic premises of Islamism, and the AKP rule requires this Islamic legitimacy and ritualized demonstrations of piety. As the AKP

consolidated its grip on power, it did make several blatant moves toward Islamizing public life: in the case of alcohol, for example, excluding it from TV screens and print media by various mechanisms and sending its price skyrocketing by increased taxation. Without doubt, such policies have rendered Islam more visible (Eligür, 2010; Kaya, 2015). The number of Islamic vocational schools delivering Islamic teaching to the youth rose steeply (Özgür, 2012). The AKP employed various means to indoctrinate the youth by supporting and financing Islamic foundations; and the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) was promoted as a primary state institution with its budget boosted to deliver Quranic summer courses, summer schools, and other educational activities (Lord, 2018: 115). A major mosque-building program (including in state universities) was run to dominate the skylines.

Nevertheless, the success of all these remained limited as the secularization drive within society was robust. Unable to respond to and revert this deeper process, the AKP government could only address conservatives and deliver their allegiance. The growing authoritarianism, meanwhile, with rife corruption, shady business connections, extravagant displays of hedonist *nouveau riche* lifestyles, and incorporation of business elites configured a different type of unaccountable and nontransparent regime. What transpired was not a puritanical Islamist regime but a massively corrupt one entangled in power relations making (often fake) displays of piety (like the ludicrous ritual of celebrities hiding rakı and wine glasses while taking pictures for social media) also a function of sycophancy to an all-powerful state. The authoritarian policies of the AKP became a motley mélange. As the party's reformism and enthusiasm for accession to the EU ebbed with the military muzzled and the state apparatus increasingly captured by the party, the AKP gravitated to populist discourses amalgamating nationalism with Islamism. The AKP's "New Turkey" (*Yeni Türkiye*) that emerged from this authoritarian turn was quite different from what had been imagined for the last three decades.

The AKP-aligned intellectuals need to be contextualized within this conjecture. Coming from a variety of political and cultural backgrounds, they constitute an amalgam and employ diverse but also partially overlapping sets of arguments deriving from the discursive universes of populism, Islamism, and even, selectively and arbitrarily, liberalism and the left. These arguments are pragmatically articulated, tailored to different audiences to justify the immediate governmental practices and also, more importantly, to discredit and implicate opposition. The intellectuals propounding such

arguments pursue a number of disparate strategies and modalities to legitimize the AKP rule and incriminate opposition. This book delineates and distinguishes the main cohorts of AKP-aligned intellectuals.

THE SOVIET UNION, ITS INTELLIGENTSIA, AND THE OTHER AUTOCRACIES

An age-old question is that of whether autocracies believe in themselves.² The most conspicuous case in this context, which fascinated intellectual historians, was the Soviet Union. The extent of the self-indoctrination of the “old Bolsheviks” and their response to the Stalinist purges have been a constant and highly politically charged debate. Bukharin’s perturbing “confessions” in the Moscow trials have been given as the ultimate and most grotesque instance of Soviet communism as the delusional Bolshevik mindset superimposed by the ideological contours of Marxism, with Arthur Koestler’s monumental *Darkness at Noon* memorably bearing testament to this riddle of the purged Bolsheviks confessing their illusionary crimes and docilely submitting to the sacrosanct authority of the party.

The self-captivating mindset and ideological convictions of the purged Bolshevik victims of the Stalinist terror spellbound these critics. Accordingly, Bukharin’s confessions lay naked the Bolshevik delusion (Judt, 1994: 102–116). The Slansky trial in Prague in 1952, best monumentalized by Costa-Gavras’ movie *L’Aveu* (1970), was also taken as another exposé of this slavish mentality. Believing in the absolute righteousness, grasp of course of history, and prophetic calling of Marxism, the Bolsheviks equated the party with historical reason. This predisposition was filtered through Lenin’s intervention in the Marxian core. Refusing to posit the working class as the sole engine of change, Lenin attributed the politically conscious and savvy party with an agency to move history (Kolakowski, 1978: 384–98). Seeing the party as bestowed with this historical reason and mission, for Lenin, the party could never be mistaken. It was infallible. Subsequently, as a corollary to the Leninist party mystique, the next step was taken by the doctrine equating the party with Stalin himself. Stalin personalized the party and, therefore, himself embodied the historical reason and infallibility (Kolakowski, 1981: 4). The Stalinist leader cult was built over this theoretical edifice and legacy constructed along a few generations of theoreticians.

² For a discussion of “fascist lies,” see Finchelstein (2020).

Such explicitly religious and divine qualities of Marxism as well as global communism's hierarchical Catholic Church structure especially mesmerized those who parted ways with Marxism. Rather than subscribing to a crude anti-communism, these ex-communists challenged the communist/socialist mind by exposing the fallacies of Marxism and revealing its dogmatic and religious nature. For ex-communists-turned-avid-anti-communists, such as Arthur Koestler, Ignazio Silone, and Stephen Spender, Marxism was a mystique that spellbound intellectuals (Crossman, 1949). They concluded that the Soviet Union ensured allegiance through this pseudo-ideology, as encapsulated by Raymond Aron's (1955) coinage, "opium of the intellectuals."

Subsequent dispassionate and scholarly reappraisals of historians of the Soviet Union were more reticent, however. They maintained that Bukharin relented not because he was deluded by ideological fixation but because he knew that otherwise, his wife and newborn would meet the same fate, as contended by Stephen F. Cohen (1971: 375) in his now-classic biography:

Those who "confessed" did so for the most human of reasons: they were physically or otherwise compelled. A few Bolsheviks may have confessed because of Rubashov-like motives; but for the great tormented majority, a survivor tells us, *Darkness at Noon* "would have been the subject of gay mockery."

Stalin was self-trained to think in Marxian terms and concepts, publishing even after WWII on Marxism and linguistics. Hailing from the peasantry, Stalin's successor, Khrushchev, was much less interested in such schemes and vocabularies (Taubman, 2003). Still, having risen from lower-class origins, Khrushchev was moved to improve the living conditions of the Russian poor and believed in the transformative power of the Soviet state and industry to bring about the promised economic prosperity. In his famous shoe banging episode from the rostrum of the UN in which he reminded his US colleagues that the Soviets would bury them, he displayed an avid commitment and resoluteness as well as faith in Marxist historical law. His destalinization instilled a new hope that the Soviet Union could be molded into a better form. In his push for a better and more prosperous future, however, Khrushchev incarnated the last stand of Soviet optimism.

Khrushchev's ouster and the institutionalization of neo-Stalinism extinguished any remaining faith in the transformative powers of the regime. Although recent revisionist studies disagree and reject associating the Brezhnev era with stagnation especially with regard to its first half (Fainberg & Kalinovsky, 2016; Schattenberg, 2021), Brezhnevism was arguably organized to uphold the status quo and preserve the social and political order, repelling dissent and instability. Unlike Stalinism, which had destroyed all institutions and was unconcerned with the sustainability of order, Brezhnevism undertook an institution-building governance, aiming to reinforce stability. Stalinism might have benefited from an ideological zeal, but Brezhnevism had to be faceless, colorless, and free of any passion, pledge, or idealism (Shlapentokh, 1990; Zubok, 2009).

Vacillating between zeal, commitment, and conformism, the Soviet intelligentsia and state elite submitted to state exigencies, especially after 1968. Claims to ideological purity and firmness became matters of state affairs regulated and imposed by governmental bodies, orders, and fiat. Any remnant of ideology came to be regarded as subversive. By the Brezhnev era, ideological legitimization became merely a technical module:

Under Brezhnev, it was no longer necessary to prove that one believed in the Soviet communist project. There was no debate about what this project meant or how to bring it to fruition. It was enough just to accept its existence and to mind one's business. The KGB watched carefully to make sure everyone observed the ritualized rules of public behavior, and it often conducted "prophylactic measures" to warn and intimidate possible transgressors. (Zubok, 2009: 298)

By now, semblance and structure were more important than any ideal, political technologies rather than political aims, ideologies rather than ideas. Mikhail Suslov, the ideological chief of the Brezhnevite collective leadership, took an increasingly hardline approach to purging the remnants of the Thaw era (Petroff, 1988) but his intransigence did not derive from ideological commitment and conviction. As he once ranted while closing down the liberal journal *Novy Mir*, "We deluded, depraved intelligentsia" (Zubok, 2009: 273).

The transformation of communists from believers in utopia (Stites, 1991) into acquiescent apparatchiks followed a trajectory that has recurred in all authoritarian ideologies holding power for extended periods, from interwar fascism to communism, Baathism, and anti-colonialist