

Politische Kultur in den neuen Demokratien Europas

RESEARCH

Melek Zorlu

Reproduction of Conservatism

The Struggles for Cultural Hegemony
in Turkey's Conservative Right in
the 1950s and 2000s



Springer VS

Politische Kultur in den neuen Demokratien Europas

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Foreword

When Ms. Zorlu asked me to supervise her dissertation about five years ago, I immediately agreed. This was despite the fact that I am anything but an expert on Turkey. The fact that my view of the subject matter and my engagement with Turkey has changed significantly since then has a lot to do with this dissertation supervision and the many conversations with Ms. Zorlu, but also with her Turkish doctoral students who started with me afterwards. I am still not an expert on Turkey, but I have learned a lot about it. Which is also the point - Melek Zorlu was more or less the icebreaker for further work on Turkey and other Turkish doctoral students. And I have never regretted that.

The dissertation presented by Ms. Zorlu deals with the spread of authoritarian conservatism in Turkey after the election of Recep Tayyip Erdogan and its anchoring in debates of the 1950s in Turkey. For her analysis, Ms. Zorlu examines the writings of intellectuals who can be regarded as the pacemakers or think tanks of the important social and political debates. Accordingly, due to the historical-comparative approach in the tradition of Charles Tilly, this is a work in comparative political science. At the same time, there are also elements of political philosophy, literary studies (Terry Eagleton), Islamic studies and Turkology, rounding off the interdisciplinary political science approach.

Ms. Zorlu uses Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony as a theoretical basis, which is original, and applies this to the AKP of the present. As a result, she arrives at a tradition of cultural hegemony of Turkish conservatism. In addition to Gramsci's analysis, she subsequently uses the hegemony analysis in a comprehensible way and combines this with a historical-comparative approach in the analysis of the AKP. Her aim is to work out the ideology and narratives

of the cultural hegemony of conservatives in Turkey and to establish the existing strands between the earlier movement and the current development. In doing so, she identifies mechanisms of the reproduction of cultural hegemony and also an increased spread of authoritarian patterns of exercising power. The topic of religion also plays an important role in her work, which, as expected, makes me particularly happy as a sociologist of religion. According to her analysis, it is a driving force behind Turkish conservatism.

In her dissertation, Ms. Zorlu works her way impressively through various intellectuals of the 1950s and identifies the philosophical-historical starting point of Turkish conservatism. In doing so, she comes to the conclusion that current Turkish conservatism follows on from 1950s conservatism in Turkey in quite a few respects. At the same time, the aim of the AKP's Turkish conservatism is to establish a cultural hegemony, whereby it is gradually slipping into authoritarianism. Ms. Zorlu describes conservatism in Turkey as *limited conservatism*, in contrast to, but also in line with, Western definitions of conservatism. Its central goals include the desire for national harmony, obedience and loyalty. At this point, she moves within the explanatory arc of Anne Appelbaum, who has identified loyalty to the "leader" as a central characteristic for advancement in autocracies and authoritarian systems. According to her work, Turkish conservatism is linked to a strong social and economic modernization that can increasingly do without Western freedoms. Intellectuals provide the conservative mind-set for this. In this respect, there are differences today, but also similarities with the 1950s. It is the similarities in the cultural and intellectual sphere that are being reproduced - and that make authoritarian conservatism possible in today's Turkey.

Through her work, Ms. Zorlu succeeds in providing a deep insight into the ideological development of Turkey. She names the driving forces, ideologues and the conservative politics that make use of them. At the same time, it becomes clear that the path between conservatism and authoritarianism is sometimes shorter than democrats might like. And Turkey is not an isolated case here, nor can its omnipresence in many political regimes around the world be denied by orientalism and prejudice. Melek Zorlu's work makes it all too clear what role intellectuals play in this and how cultural hegemony is based on them. Accordingly, comparative political scientists are advised to take a closer look at Turkey. Paradigmatic developments of democratic backsliding are not always to be found far away. Ms. Zorlu is to be congratulated wholeheartedly on this insight and her work, and it is recommended reading for all those who pick it up.

Prof. Dr. Gert Pickel

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Abbreviations

AKP	Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party)
ATÜT	Asya Tipi Üretim Tarzı (Asian Production Style)
CHP	Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican People's Party)
DP	Demokrat Parti (Democrat Party)
ERP	The European Recovery Program
EU	European Union
İDP	İslami Dergiler Projesi (The Islamist Magazines Project)
İKSV	İstanbul Kültür ve Sanat Vakfı (İstanbul Foundation of Culture and Arts)
İTC	İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti (The Committee of Union and Progress)
KADEM	Kadın ve Demokrasi Derneği (The Women and Democracy Association)
KEFEK	Kadın Erkek Fırsat Eşitliği Komisyonu (The Equal Opportunities Commission for Women and Men)
MGK	Milli Güvenlik Kurulu (The National Security Council)
MİT	Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı (The National Intelligence Organization)
PhD	Doctorate of Philosophy
RP	Refah Partisi (Welfare Party)
TCF	Terakkiperver Cumhuriyet Fırkası (The Progressive Republican Party)
TMSF	Tasarruf Mevduatı Sigorta Fonu (Saving Deposit Insurance Fund)
TRT	Türkiye Radyo ve Televizyon Kurumu (Turkish Radio and Television Corporation)
USA	United States of America
YÖK	Yükseköğretim Kurulu (The Council for Higher Education)



Introduction: Conservatism, Hegemony, and Intellectuals

1

1.1 The Problematique and the Historical Context

There was a drastic change in Turkey's political landscape in the early 2000s, with effects that still resonate today. Founded by Islamist cadres, the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) swept to power in 2002 by ousting the incumbent center-right parties despite not being well-established when it first took power. It subsequently strengthened its political power and established its hegemony before becoming more authoritarian to the extent that it should now be viewed in terms a political regime transformation that can be described as neo-fascist (Oğuz, 2023). The key issue here is whether the concept of hegemony can still explain Turkey's political situation. To address this question, it is first necessary to clarify what hegemony is and how it is established, maintained, and reproduced. The most significant feature of this development is the growth of conservatism and the rise of authoritarian politics. Following the Gezi Resistance in 2013, the rise of authoritarianism intertwined with the surge of conservatism. Determining the interrelationships between these two phenomena helps explain Turkey's political landscape and develop a broader conceptual framework. The concept that helps to evaluate these two phenomena and their rise in Turkey is hegemony in Gramscian sense (Gramsci, 1999).

AKP's early discourse of conservative-democracy, which is closely connected to its election victory in 2002, is founded on a semi-official delineation employing contemporary conservative political theory by Yalçın Akdoğan, a counselor to AKP leader Erdoğan. He first formulated this viewpoint in the booklet "AK Party and Conservative Democracy", published with an introduction by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Akdoğan, 2004) in which he states, "The presentation of the conservative democratic line in accordance with the roots and historical codes

of conservatism, but based on the social and cultural traditions of our geography in which we do politics, will bring a new breath to Turkish politics” (Akdoğan, 2004; 6)¹. Conservative democracy combines universal principles of liberal democracy with a specifically conservative national orientation. That is, it refers to the fundamental ideas of universal liberal democracy, including gradual change, restriction of power, promotion of democratic values, importance of compromise, and support for the free market (Akdoğan, 2004; 9–14). In this interpretation of conservatism, the emphasis in the text regarding protection of the family and opposition to state support for abortion and gender reassignment operations, citing religious reasons, is revealing. For instance, it claims that gender reassignment disrupts family institutions and argues against state funding of abortion because it fails to safeguard the rights of the unborn child (Akdoğan, 2004; 13).

The booklet refers to Yahya Kemal, Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, and Nurettin Topçu as representatives of the conservative tradition within the framework of “our own tradition of conservative thought” (Akdoğan, 2004; 25). According to Akdoğan, these intellectuals are “thinkers who do not put much emphasis on Islamism, do not give credit to racist Turkism, are skeptical of the radically changing attitude of the official ideology, and advocate that change should occur gradually” (25–26). Akdoğan favors conservatism because it is more moderate than Islamism and avoids political tensions (Akdoğan, 2004; 13). This focus on differentiating conservatism from Islamism is a significant factor in the Turkish context. These political figures rose to power by reproducing conservatism, and by doing so, successfully engaged the general public by means of these moderate democratic discourses. They also received substantial intellectual support.² This political attitude was also seen as the incorporation of Islamism into the current political framework (Tuğal, 2009). Nevertheless, as time passed, the original meaning of a *conservative democrat*, as defined by democratic principles, gradually diminished. Instead, the focus shifted towards emphasizing “religious values

¹ The translations from Turkish to English in this book have been made by the author.

² For example, during the 2010 Constitutional amendment process “Some leftists and liberals supported the amendments by launching a campaign called “not enough, but yes.” Despite being aware that the changes would compromise the separation of powers, they considered the AKP control over the judiciary as preferable to maintaining a non-partisan but ideologically “security-oriented” judiciary. Not foreseen by the boycotting Kurdish leaders or the “not enough, but yes” campaigners were the takeover of the judiciary by the AKP’s allied Gülenists; they also underestimated the extent to which the referendum would bolster the ego of Erdogan and enhance the confidence and power of the AKP” (Arat, 2020).

and traditions” rather than the ideals of moderation and compromise. An important example here is that the government’s intellectual-advisory circle initiated and added issues surrounding cultural hegemony to the political agenda.

In 2012, for example, former president Abdullah Gül’s advisor for cultural and artistic affairs, Prof. Mustafa İsen, started a debate about “*conservative culture*” (Türkiye Gazetesi, 2013, March, 16). He suggested that a worldview that has gained power over the political sphere should likewise create and promote its own artistic expression and showcase it to the public. Since then, Erdoğan (2017) has insisted that “we do not have power over cultural field”:

You know, holding political authority is an entirely different matter. The concept of social and cultural power is distinct. We have held uninterrupted political authority for the past fourteen years. However, challenges persist regarding our social and cultural hegemony. Without a doubt, there have been extremely positive and optimistic developments. An increasing number of students are enrolling in Imam Hatip schools; it is an extremely positive development that electives on topics including the Holy Quran, the Prophet Muhammad, and Ottoman Turkish are offered in every school. Nevertheless, there are still numerous deficiencies that plague our nation with respect to the demands of our country, and the upbringing of the generations that constitute our aspiration (Erdoğan, 2017).

Furthermore, shortly after Erdoğan was sworn in as president after the transition from a parliamentary to a presidential system in 2018, the head of the presidential palace’s propaganda unit, Fahrettin Altun, tweeted intriguingly, “Your political hegemony is over; your cultural hegemony will soon be over as well...” (Mumay, 2023). Hence, the intellectual-advisory circle’s discussions regarding cultural hegemony in relation to political power since 2012 indicate a noteworthy political discourse that has had comparable effects to those of the conservative democracy discourse. Like I have indicated in the beginning, since the Gezi Resistance in 2013, cultural hegemony has become a prominent issue within Turkey’s increasingly radicalized and polarizing political discourse.

This phenomenon can be considered in two dimensions. First, it is necessary to take into account the influence of intellectuals, especially AKP staff with academic backgrounds, such as Yalçın Akdoğan, Mustafa İsen, İbrahim Kalın, İskender Pala, and Ahmet Davutoğlu. This dimension can be discussed in terms of Gramsci’s conceptualization of the organic intellectual. The second dimension concerns the background to these intellectuals’ political discourses. In this background, the views of intellectuals like Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, Nurettin Topçu, and Peyami Safa are pointed out as the origins of conservatism, and they are presented as a reference point. Therefore, it is critical to comprehend the similarities

and distinctions between the perspectives of intellectuals referenced as historical sources to elucidate the present conservative trend in Turkey. To accomplish this, attention should be focused on the 1950s because this was a period conducive to discussing a conservative ethos although conservatism was not adopted as a cohesive political ideology. In addition, the direction and major trends of Turkey's political landscape were mainly established after the Second World War.

Turkey's first multi-party elections were held in 1946 while the 1950 elections brought a new political party to power: the Demokrat Parti (Democrat Party—DP) with a religiously conservative agenda.³ At a time of remarkable social transformations, the ruling party during the single-party era, the Kemalist, Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican People's Party—CHP), became the parliamentary opposition. Like AKP later, DP used democratic discourses to gain power before gradually becoming authoritarian and attempting major political interventions. Along with the multi-party political order, another process has continued until today in which the conservative voice had a significant political effect. "Conservative thought and political discourse, which started to develop in the 1950s and formed the intellectual basis of all right-wing discourses and policies along with Islamism by producing an alternative national identity and nationalism that primarily incorporates religious symbols paved the way for the obstruction in creating a secular national identity" (Mert, 2006; 314). As Kemalism became conservative and unable to reproduce itself as an ideology, conservatism emerged as an alternative (Parla; 2009). Another essential factor in this conservative revival was changing balances in the post-war period, especially related to anti-communism (Örnek, 2015)⁴.

The conservative ethos in Turkey during the 1950s can be understood within the framework of this comprehensive structural and ideological transformation. The second important structural process regarding conservatism in Turkey is the period from the second half of the 1990s, especially after the post-modern coup

³ DP was founded by an opposition clique within CHP. In Turkey's first multiparty elections in 1946, DP won 64 seats out of 465, with 13.1% of the vote, and failed to defeat the ruling CHP. In the 1950 general elections, however, DP became the first opposition party to gain power in Turkey by unseating CHP. DP then repeated its victory in 1954 (58.4% the vote and 503 deputies out of 541) and 1957 (48.6% of the vote and 424 deputies out of 602). It was overthrown by the military coup of 27 May 1960 and closed on 29 September 1960.

⁴ The Marshall plan (officially, the European Recovery Program, ERP) constituted the material dimension of US influence in Turkey. This was a US initiative enacted in 1948 to provide foreign aid to Western Europe aiming to rebuild war-torn regions, remove trade barriers, modernize industry, increase European prosperity, and prevent the spread of communism. Turkey was one of the countries that benefited from this aid in various ways between 1947 and 1953.

of February 28, 1997.⁵ In this process, Kemalism began to lose its influence as a state ideology and retreated into the civil sphere with an “oppositional” position (Özyürek, 2007). In addition, Islamism experienced a surge in influence and internalization, particularly after Islamist Refah Partisi (Welfare Party—RP) won the 1994 municipal elections in Ankara and Istanbul. These developments should also be analyzed within the framework of the neoliberal shift that occurred after 1980, when ethnic nationalism and identity politics became increasingly significant. That is, it is difficult to understand AKP’s transformation without taking into account Turkey’s adaptation to the neoliberal world order after 1980, part of which was AKP’s reproduced conservative discourse.

In this study, it will be investigated whether the reproduction of conservatism in Turkey during the 2000s can be understood both as an intellectual pursuit and in connection to structural changes. In this regard, the first area of discussion concerns the idea of conservative democracy and debates around cultural hegemony. The second significant area is the relationship between conservatism, Kemalism, and Islamism.

1.2 Primary Objectives of the Research

The main question that this study aims to answer is how was the 1950s’ conservative ethos reproduced by intellectuals during AKP’s first decade? The main research question is: “How and why was the 1950 conservative ethos reproduced by intellectuals during the AKP first decade?” The answer to is directly linked to recent phenomena like growing authoritarianism and manifestations of religion in the public sphere as well as the origins of conservatism as an ideology, particularly after the Second World War. Given that one of the main objectives of this study is to try to understand the background of this reproduction, the second objective is to understand how the struggle for cultural hegemony manifests itself in this reproduction processes.

My general thesis is categorized along three dimensions: an analytical framework-defined definition of “limited” conservatism and its relationship to conservatism in Turkey; the context of authoritarianism and the rise of conservatism; and the role and function of conservative intellectuals in constructing cultural hegemony.

⁵ The term post-modern coup is the name given to the process in which the Turkish Armed Forces did not directly unseat the government on February 28, 1997, but forced it to resign through the media. (See Hongur, 2006).

In this regard, one of the main concerns will be the *dominant ideas* of these historical periods, their alignment with government policies, and how intellectuals reflect and adapt to these ideological changes. It is not possible to situate the 1950s and conservatism in this era without considering the impact of the Cold War, anticommunism, and the American way of life in Turkey. Likewise, the first decade of AKP cannot be considered without considering the demise of the bipolar world order and the rise of neoliberalism.⁶

Accordingly, the second focal point to comprehensively understand conservatism during these two periods is the conservative intellectuals' perspective; particularly, the primary social and cultural debates, how intellectuals responded to them, and what they were debating. Conservatism in Turkey emerged alongside modernization efforts; it appears to be a set of ideas conceived and produced by intellectuals, rather than mass reactions with a social base. This emphasis is fundamentally related to conservatism in Turkey and its distinctive characteristics, which are also connected to conservatism as an ideology in general.⁷ Conservatism in Turkey Another way of locating the cultural dimensions of this adjustment process, and the original contribution of this study, is to reveal how conservative intellectuals have worked out this socio-cultural transformation in more nuanced forms in their novels.⁸ A good place to start is by considering how conservatism is addressed in current debates and its historical context.

This study focuses on both structural transformations and the changes within conservatism through a comparative perspective. Therefore, its contribution to the relevant literature can be considered in terms of *three axes*: first, questioning the current dominant approach that treats conservatism as a state of mind and placing conservatism in an ideological-political framework that is not limited to recent debates; second, using Gramsci's theory to evaluate conservative ideas in terms of hegemony and power relations rather than as the personal affairs of thinkers; third, discussing the ideas of contemporary conservative thinkers through a comparative perspective and evaluating them in a historical context in order to develop an analytical framework for conservatism in Turkey. To achieve these goals, the study combines an analysis of hegemony with a historical-comparative approach. A historical comparison can also assist in locating this investigation within the context of structural transformations and political regime debates. I will also

⁶ The concepts of the Cold War and neoliberalism is addressed in detail in Chap. 4.

⁷ Conservatism is discussed in theoretical terms in Chap. 3 (Sect. 3.2), where it is considered as a limited political approach in terms of its perception of time and understanding of collectivity. Chap. 5 (Sect. 5.2) discusses Conservatism in Turkey and its main characteristics.

⁸ Chapter 6 provides this discussion.