

Politics & Diplomacy

Political Opposition in Turkey

From Political Parties to the Gezi Protests

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Since Turkey held general elections in June 2011, heightened scholarly discussion has focused on the country's evolving party system. During the eleven years since the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) took over the reins of government, scholars have increasingly commented on two observable trends: a reduction in voter volatility and realignment of votes to the AKP. Three successive electoral victories for the AKP have ignited debates regarding the existence of a dominant party system. The AKP effectively remains electorally unchallenged and is comfortably situated as a single party government with virtually unimpeded legislative and executive capabilities. Why is this the case? Since its first national victory in 2002, the AKP's large parliamentary majority has allowed the party to implement a wide array of programmatic priorities.¹

Since 2002, the AKP's governing mandate has seldom been challenged by opposition political parties in parliament. Both the main opposition Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) and the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) lack the necessary parliamentary seats to block the passage of AKP legislative pursuits. Instead, predominant challenges to AKP rule have appeared in the

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form of extra-parliamentary and arguably undemocratic forces. The office of the President while occupied by Ahmet Necdet Sezer (2000-2007), the Constitutional Court, and the armed forces—to varying degrees and on different occasions—mounted individual challenges to undermine the government. President Sezer made history by vetoing more pieces of AKP-passed legislation than any of his predecessors.² The country's constitutional court mounted a nearly successful campaign to close down the AKP in 2007, accusing the party of being "a focus of anti-secular" activities.³ Finally, the armed forces, which for most of the multiparty era in Turkey—from 1946 onwards—considered itself as the ultimate guardian of the secular Kemalist state, issued a communiqué on 27 April 2007 highlighting their concerns regarding the government's choice for president: Abdullah Gül.⁴ The purpose of this article is to explain why in a competitive parliamentary democracy such as Turkey, the AKP has not faced credible political opposition. Accounting for this electoral dominance and success of the AKP has been a widely discussed topic since 2002.⁵

Indeed, many observers of Turkish politics have not only highlighted the virtual lack of political opposition in Turkey, but also pointed to the effects of this dearth of opposition's marked retrogression in Turkey's democracy. The AKP's success lies in a combination of proposed factors: grassroots organizational capacity, its ability to build a sizable electoral alliance of voters from all sections of Turkish society, and, finally, its self-projection as a "service-oriented" and results-driven

government as displayed by relative improvements in economic and infrastructural development, as well as citizen social mobility. By contrast, opposition parties lack "tangible credibility" amongst voters with which to challenge the concrete results-oriented record of the incumbent.

The single biggest democratic challenge that the AKP has had to confront in the last decade has come from individual citizens. Beginning in May 2013, a new wave of political opposition began to challenge the governing capacity of the government: the "Gezi Park" protests. Throughout the AKP-era, resentment has been brewing toward a governing style perceived as largely non-consultation based, non-inclusive, and increasingly authoritarian. The underlying and immediate factors that sparked individual citizen protests stemmed from pieces of legislation seemingly targeted at regulating aspects of social life, such as placing limits on abortion procedures and increased regulation of alcohol sales. The Gezi Park protests have heralded a new mode of political participation in Turkey that is practiced by individual citizens, reliant on peaceful demonstrations, facilitated by social media, and not aligned with any one political party. The protests that have gripped the country are a stark declaration that democratic political opposition to any incumbent party may not be limited to the confines of the ballot box, and that citizen participation extends further than the boundaries recommended by Joseph Schumpeter's conception of minimalist democracy. This article begins by outlining the reasons for the AKP's electoral successes, and then

discusses the ineffectiveness of the two main opposition parties. Finally, the spotlight is turned upon a new wave of citizenship participation as a possible source of political opposition—one which Turkish governments are not accustomed to accommodating.

The AKP: Turkey's Professional Political Party?

Since 2002 the AKP has branded itself as the "listening" and "representative" party of the people. Unlike its predecessor, the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*, RP), the AKP's base of electoral support has grown beyond a narrow niche of religiously and socially conservative individuals. At the 2011 parliamentary elections, the party succeeded in gaining nearly one out of two valid votes, approximately 21 million. The premiership of Tayyip Erdogan has concentrated on the delivery of a "services"-oriented government. This governing style continually seeks to deliver tangible benefits to the citizen body: low inflation, economic growth, new schools, hospitals, health-care reform, and infrastructural development, among others. Such concrete and ultimately economic-oriented goals have seemingly supplanted the RP's ideological and exclusively Islamist focus.⁶

The AKP succeeded in establishing new economic alliances and building on existing networks. Political Islam's economic message in the RP days was a much less pronounced component of its electoral agenda compared to that of the AKP. The AKP has engaged in developing and furthering linkages with business networks both at the level of small/medium-sized, as well as at the level of big business. This eco-

nomic development strategy also manifests itself in Turkish foreign policy which, in the AKP decade, concentrated on both expanding the country's business and economic capacity in a variety of geographical regions, including the Middle East and North Africa and Southeast Asia, and forging closer economic ties with the United States.⁷ This has been facilitated by signing numerous free trade agreements, lifting visa restrictions, and instituting government incentives for foreign investors in Turkey. All said, the AKP's pronounced emphasis on economic development has resulted in what some commentators have referred to as the development of a "new middle-class" in Turkey.⁸ To this end, over the last decade Turkey has become the seventeenth largest economy in the world, boasting record levels of per capita income and consistently high rates of GDP growth. At times, it is referred to as an emerging regional power. Given the prominence of such accomplishments, to what extent is it possible to expect opposition parties to be able to successfully unseat the incumbent?

The Republican People's Party (CHP).

Since 2002, the party has maintained the title of main opposition party—a title to which it has been largely accustomed since the beginning of multiparty politics in the 1950s. Since this time, the CHP has consistently found it difficult to be perceived as a representative party of the people. The party has been labeled an elitist entity that chose to mould Turkish society in a particular image: one that was decreed by the founding secular and nationalist elite. Commonly referred to as

"Kemalism," Turkey's modernization and westernization goals as envisioned by Kemal Ataturk were imposed by the CHP in preference and in place of any other "ism." The CHP is primarily seen as a top-down and elitist agent of modernization, one that is unrepresentative of the culture, identity, and particular demands of the citizen body.

Lacking the parliamentary majority to challenge the AKP's mandate (see Table 1), the CHP has primarily relied on veto players to mount political opposition. This was achieved by a combination of methods: directly/indirectly supporting the military's outbursts and public dissatisfaction with the AKP; referring a variety of AKP-passed pieces of legislation to the constitutional court for annulment; allying party policies and statements to match those of former-President Sezer's, who

areas that attracted controversy were often approached in black and white terms, positioning the party as an agent of polarization. Any legislative initiatives pertaining to individual, minority, or associational freedoms—most notably regarding the headscarf issue—were portrayed by the CHP as attempts by the government as legislative initiatives to "Islamize" the country and undermine the country's secular identity. In addition to not being in office, the CHP is only in charge of 527 out of 2903 district mayoralties, as well as two greater municipality mayoralties: Izmir and Eskisehir. Put simply, the party cannot tangibly demonstrate what it can offer voters on either a national or a local platform.

With the goal of being perceived as a representative agent—one that was inclusive particularly of the country's

Election Year	AKP (seats)	CHP (seats)	MHP (seats)
2002	34.2 (363)	19.4 (178)	8.3 (0)
2007	46.6 (341)	20.8 (112)	14.2 (71)
2011	49.8 (327)	25.9 (135)	13 (53)

Table 1 Vote Shares by the largest political parties in the Turkish Grand National Assembly.

publicly challenged the government's mandate on numerous occasions; and choosing to remain silent, even tacitly supporting proceedings initiated by the special prosecutor to close down the AKP in 2007. Under the leadership of Deniz Baykal, the party engaged in what can only be defined as projection of dyadic policy alternatives. Policy

religious and ethnic diversity, attempts to overhaul the party's political platform came to fruition under the (new) leadership of Kemal Kılıçdaroglu. Since assuming his position as chairman in May 2010 following the resignation of Deniz Baykal in the wake of a sex scandal, Kılıçdaroglu has been successful in changing the face of the

party. The new leadership is engaged in a process of reform to rebrand the party's image by revamping its political platform and institutional framework.

political evolution. They came largely as a result of an exogenous shock in the form of the aforementioned sex scandal, which forced out the old leader-

The Republican People's Party suffers from factionalism amongst its own ranks...a hallmark feature of the party since its foundation.

Key leadership positions within the CHP are now occupied by individuals close to Kılıçdaroglu and of a liberal disposition. In terms of determining parliamentary candidates, the use of primary elections was carried out in approximately half of the electoral districts, giving party members a direct choice in selecting their MP candidates.

In terms of projecting a reconstituted political platform, the practice of "opposition for the sake of opposition" has been abandoned by Kılıçdaroglu. In place of blindly opposing any and all government policies, the party has chosen to pick battles it sees as worth fighting. This can be observed with targeted campaigns against government-state corruption, mass housing projects initiated under the rhetoric of urban development and regeneration, and, finally, the proposal of a more standardized national healthcare and insurance program (referred to as "family insurance"). Given these substantive and far reaching changes, how can one explain the CHP's inability to significantly increase its popular appeal and also unseat the government?

One immediate reason is timing. The changes in party leadership and policies came not as a result of what can be referred to as a natural cycle of

ship and paved the way for the rise of Kılıçdaroglu. Kılıçdaroglu was neither prepared to assume the position of party chairman, nor did he have sufficient time to convince the electorate prior to the June 2011 general elections that, under his leadership, the party stood for a new and enlightened set of ideals.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the CHP suffers from factionalism within its own ranks. This is not a new phenomenon, and has been a hallmark feature of the party since its foundation. The two main opposing factions in existence within the CHP can be referred to as the "reformist" and "nationalist" factions. Repeatedly locking horns over areas of policy, the opposing factions have the net effect of weakening the party. Kılıçdaroglu has been forced to cut back on the supportive statements he offered towards the Kurdish Opening initiative after several members of the nationalist faction challenged party support. Factionalism also projects an image that the party is not united behind a clear set of policies, suggesting that the process of change under Kılıçdaroglu remains only in rhetoric, rather than substance.

The Nationalist Action Party (MHP). Within parliament, the MHP

is the main advocate of Turkish nationalism, broadly defined. Since its establishment as a political party and movement in 1965, the MHP is arguably one of the most ideologically committed parties in the country's party spectrum. Traditionally, the party's ideology projects itself as a third way alternative

stood firmly against entertaining any aspect of the UN-brokered Annan Plan of 2004, which was spun by the MHP as "selling Cyprus" to the Greek Cypriots and abandoning the "baby [Turkish] nation". Finally, throughout the AKP era, the MHP has attempted to chastise the government on initiatives direct-

Tayyip Erdogan is identified as a strong and capable leader, which many voters identify with, and a person who is seen to be a much more charismatic leader compared to the leaders of the CHP and MHP.

to communism and capitalism, with an exclusively Turkish tinge. Predicated upon an organic view of state-society relations, the MHP maintained that love of the Turkish nation—which is defined in terms of a common culture, language, history, and ideals—should be totally independent of collective ideologies such as communism but neither should it be ravaged by the forces of uncontrolled capitalism.¹⁰

Since the early 2000s, and particularly during AKP rule, the MHP's message has become a vociferous opponent of further integration with the EU, the resolution of the Cyprus imbroglio, and all attempts at broadening the realm of individual, associational, and minority rights. The AKP's engagement with the EU accession process between 2002 and 2005 was firmly opposed by the MHP based on the essential premise that joining the EU would imply a significant and unacceptable loss of Turkish sovereignty over many areas of national competency. The party also

ed at expanding the realm of minority rights. This is most visible with the ongoing negotiations surrounding the Kurdish Opening initiative, which aims to reach a settlement with the separatist terrorist organization, the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK).

This exclusionary political platform, however, is not well received by broader sections of the voting electorate and limits the growth potential of the MHP as a mass party. Put simply, the MHP's ideological baggage, which translates into policy openings, is obsolete and out of touch with the broad array of the citizen body's electoral priorities in much the same way that political Islam arguably was in the late-1990s. The MHP does not have a specific and tangible policy agenda from which to build a national electoral agenda. Throughout its existence, the party has made itself attractive to its base supporters by its definitions of the "other." Since 2002, the party's ideological opening has rested on the following initiatives:

a sovereignty-based Euroskepticism, a distrustful stance toward globalization (largely left undefined), an uncompromising stance on the Kurdish issue, a nebulous "national economic" plan, and a projection of Turkish identity.

The Gezi Protests: A New Mode of Political Opposition and Participation?

It would appear that Turkey's political field remains without an effective opposition. While this may be partly true as far as political parties are concerned, citizen-based participation should not be underestimated. As long as the AKP continues to deliver tangible results, opposition parties will find it difficult to be considered as credible alternatives. This is largely due to voter perceptions that the AKP is getting the job of governing "done" better than any other party in recent times. In addition, in Turkey there is a strong tendency on the part of voters to associate political parties with their leaders, and voter choice

ism has gripped Turkey. Since 2002, voters that have not been AKP supporters have by and large remained silent, or expressed their disapproval mainly at the ballot box.¹³ With the continued electoral rise of the AKP in both the 2007 and 2011 general elections, anti-AKP voters grew increasingly despondent at the inability of opposition parties, the judiciary, and the presidency to check the government's executive prerogative, as well as their own inability to affect change as individuals. Although a near 50 percent had voted for the AKP, the question of who represented the other 50 percent loomed larger after 2011. Despite Tayyip Erdogan consistently stating that he was the Prime Minister of all of Turkey and not just 50 percent, this has not resounded equally across the electoral divide. Resentment toward the sale of state assets, urban regeneration and renewal plans, and perceived Islamization of government agencies such as the police force and

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is significantly influenced by strong leadership.^{11, 12} This being the case, one noticeable factor is the degree to which Erdogan is identified as a strong and capable leader, especially compared to the leaders of the CHP and MHP.

While the effectiveness of opposition political parties to challenge the AKP has been hampered, an unexpected form of citizen-based opposition activ-

the judiciary are among just some of the grievances that individuals have who do not favor the AKP. Added to this is the implementation of government plans and the proposed passage of legislation with seemingly inadequate regard for opposing views. This is particularly relevant with regards to legislation aimed at individual liberties and social issues: proposals to effectively curtail abortion

rights, C-section births, tight regulation of alcohol sales, and continuous calls for parents to raise a minimum of three children have angered many voters as unacceptable authoritarian infringements upon individual liberties.

Popularly referred to as the "Gezi Park Protests," many citizens took to the streets beginning in May 2013. Up until the protests, Gezi Park was a small, disheveled park just off Istanbul's central Taksim Square, and was

a wider anti-AKP movement across the country. This was precipitated by police brutality, aimed at clearing the park of protestors and the ensuing mainstream media silence refusing to cover the events. Gezi became both a place and a symbol for all individuals disaffected and opposed to the AKP.

What makes the Gezi protests important from the perspective of political opposition is their novelty and effectiveness of citizen participation. Individuals willingly took to the streets to

The failure to build a political platform with clearly defined goals may be the Achilles' heel of the protest movements.

in line to be redeveloped into a shopping mall complex. With the common aim of halting the park's redevelopment, numerous individuals communicating through social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook agreed to coalesce and make a stand in the park. The immediate message that resounded was "Enough is enough!" Individuals who had gathered wanted to send a clear message to the government stating that governing without consultation, without taking into account public opposition—in effect, not paying attention to any concerns of the 50 percent who did not vote for them—was nothing short of a dictatorship of the majority. Furthermore, it was a statement that highlighted the fact that the AKP had been governing like this for some time. Subsequently, and in a very short period of time, what began as an environmentally-oriented protest to protect green spaces in Istanbul quickly escalated into

protest without reference to or reliance on the political platform of any existing opposition party. In fact a conscious effort was made by protestors to distance themselves from the CHP and MHP. As much as these protests are targeted against the AKP, they are also a further expression of voter frustration with the CHP and MHP for failing to effectively challenge the government. For possibly the first time, individual citizens representative of varying demographics—most of who have never been involved in political activism—directly challenged the will and legitimacy of the government. For much of the multiparty period and certainly the AKP decade, Turkish governments have been accustomed to accommodating and dealing with interest projection and opposition through organized groups. These typically include trade unions, occupational groups engaged in collective bargaining, business inter-

est groups, and other non-governmental organizations.

Erdogan's interpretation of and response to the protests has been a mixture of confusion on the one hand and angry suppression on the other. Not only is the AKP not used to having to accommodate interest projection from non-organized groups, but the various messages broadcast by protestors have been dismissed by Erdogan as ungrateful acts by "thugs" and "looters" conspiring to undermine what in the AKP's view is the most successful and charismatic prime minister in the country's history.¹⁴ If there are discernible messages put forward by the protestors, they are based on collective opposition to what has been referred to as a dictatorship of the majority: the near 50 percent vote share achieved by the AKP in 2011, it is argued, cannot and should not be used as an excuse to ignore the 50 percent of voters who did not vote for the government. Moreover, it is argued that this majority is willfully trampling on the country's secular way of life, practicing a minimalist form of democracy that does not consult and solicit input from the wider citizen body, instead broadcasting its right to govern based on a "mandate" gained at the ballot box.

Armed only with smartphones, social media outlets, and wit, the protestors were happy to accept insults such as *çapulcu* (looter/thug) and to personally embrace the term, suggesting "that if individuals...want to petition or object to their government's actions via peaceful methods are to be referred to as *çapulcu*, then they would continue to *çapul*!"¹⁵ Continued government crack-down on the protests was compounded

by a failure of the mainstream media to cover the protests based on the media's fear of government reprisals. Instead of broadcasting the mass demonstrations, national television channels such as CNN-Turk opted to show alternative programs such as penguin documentaries. The penguin was immediately adopted as one of most immediately recognizable symbols of the anti-AKP demonstrations. The protest movement has fought back by resorting to mocking both the government and the media. Absent a free press and subject to violence when assembling in protest, Turks—like James Scott's subjects of study in *Weapons of the Weak*—use humor to bolster their own morale and to incrementally erode the legitimacy and power of their leader in (relatively) costless ways.¹⁶

The net impact of the protests has been considerable. The economy, mainly typified by the stock exchange, took a dive. More poignantly, individuals who do not identify with the AKP's services-oriented governing style and more conservative social agenda have learned that they do not have to wait for elections to raise their concerns, nor do they have to belong to a political party to convey their objections. The spectacle has attracted widespread international media attention culminating in condemnation of the government, particularly from EU channels. At the same time, the protest movements lack leadership, political organization, and a clear agenda focus. This is a source of strength for the AKP. The failure to build a political platform with clearly defined goals may be the Achilles' heel of the protest movements. Whilst they have attracted wide and broad-based

public support from many parts of Turkish society, this alone may not be enough to constrain the government's grip on executive and legislative power. Despite this, the AKP and subsequent

governments may need to start becoming accustomed to the fact that support at the ballot box may be a necessary, but by itself not a sufficient condition, of democratic governance.