



THE RISE OF IDENTITY POLITICS IN TURKEY

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Abstract:

in this article I use identity politics as the survey of how the various group identities affect political processes in Turkey. The methodological survey of identity politics in this chapter has two facets: First, how Turkey deals with the identity issue, given its tens of different ethnic and religious groups; and second how identity groups (ethnic and religious) articulate their political ideas. In this article, it is argued that a passive analysis of identity groups is not methodologically correct. Rather, the causal link between those groups and politics has to be identified and carefully analysed. A dynamic analysis, on which the various groups are treated as interest-seeking agents set against the state, is logical also in view of the new state-society formula of the post-Cold War era.

Keywords: Identity politics, Turkey, identity groups, political ideas.

Resumen:

Las políticas de identidad en este artículo se enfocan sobre el efecto según el cual las diversas identidades de grupo operan en los procesos políticos de Turquía. El análisis metodológico de las políticas de identidad en este capítulo tiene dos dimensiones: primero, cómo Turquía trata el tema de la identidad, dada la existencia de decenas de diferentes grupos étnicos y religiosos, y segundo cómo los grupos de identidad (étnicos y religiosos) articulan sus ideas políticas. En este capítulo, se argumenta que un análisis pasivo de los grupos de identidad no resulta metodológicamente correcto. Más bien se ha de identificar primero el nexo causal entre estos grupos y la política para así analizarlo. Un análisis dinámico, en el cual varios grupos son tratados como agentes en busca de su propio interés frente al estado, resulta lógico también en vista de la nueva fórmula de estado-sociedad propia de la era de pos-guerra fría.

Palabras clave: Políticas identitarias, Turquía, grupos de identidad, ideas políticas.

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1. Introduction

It is somehow difficult to analyse the relationship between identity and politics in Turkey, a post-imperial society, taking into consideration that this country launched a severe nation-building process after the creation of the Republic in 1923. In the course of this, the political elites did not refrain from carrying out various grand agendas – including population exchange, domestic exodus, wealth levy and conscription of wealth – to homogenize the population. For example, more than one million Anatolian Greeks left Turkey as a result of the Turco-Greek Agreement in 1923. Article 11 of the Treaty of Lausanne addressed population exchange between Turkey and Greece.² The major strategy of the Turkish Republic was to create a homogenous Turkish nation. Thus not only non-Muslim groups but also larger Muslim groups such as Kurds were subjected to such nation-building agendas in 1934. The government's sophisticated settlement law (1934 *İskan Kanunu*) aimed at 'the assimilation of non-Turkish elements into Turkish culture' by designating three kinds of settlement zone: 'those where the Turkish-culture population had to be increased; those where the groups to be assimilated could be resettled; and those that, for various reasons, had to be evacuated.'³ All ethnic groups, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, were subjected to such nation-building agendas. For example, in the 60s, the exiling of tribal and high-profile Kurds to Western Turkey was a formal policy.⁴ About three million people were displaced even as late as the 90s.⁵

As one would expect, such an ambitious agenda of creating a homogenous nation from the remnants of Ottoman Anatolia stimulated major social reactions, mainly from the larger non-Turkish groups such as the Kurds. The official nation-building agenda was thus not successful with regard to the Kurds, and less so with regard to other identity groups such as Armenians, who are now a small population group. For the various religious and ethnic groups, the coercive policies detracted from the social legitimacy of the new regime. This put the Republican nation-building agenda in a difficult position. For this reason, it is accurately remarked that Republican Turkey inserted itself into an atmosphere highly charged by identity politics with a mission to homogenize the diffuse Anatolian population as one with a dominant Turkish identity. The resultant official definition of national identity, Erik-Jan Zürcher argues, is a legacy of the early Republican period, and is the root cause of Turkey's major problems today.⁶

² Sarikoyunce Değerli, Esra: "Atatürk Dönemi Türk-Yunan Siyasi İlişkileri", *Dumlupınar Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, no. 15 (August, 2006), p. 243.

³ Van Bruinessen, Martin: "Race, culture, nation and identity politics in Turkey: some comments", Presented at the Mica Erteğün Annual Turkish Studies Workshop on Continuity and Change: *Shifting State Ideologies from Late Ottoman to Early Republican Turkey, 1890-1930*, Department of Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University, 24-26 April 1997, p. 6.

⁴ Güneş, Cengiz: "Kurdish Politics in Turkey: A Quest for Identity", *International Journal of Kurdish Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1/2 (2007), p. 20.

⁵ İmset, İsmet G.: "The PKK Terrorist or Freedom Fighters?", *The International Journal of Kurdish Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1/2 (1996), p. 47.

⁶ Jan Zürcher, Erik: "Race, culture, nation and identity politics in Turkey", paper presented at Mica Erteğün Annual Turkish Studies Workshop on Continuity and Change: *Shifting State Ideologies from Late Ottoman to Early Republican Turkey, 1890-1930*, Department of Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University, 24-26 April 1997.



2. Identity Politics: State and Interest-Seeking Groups

‘Identity politics’ in this article’s usage is the survey of how the various group identities affect political processes in Turkey. The methodological survey of identity politics has two facets: i) how Turkey deals with the identity issue, given its tens of different ethnic and religious groups; and ii) how identity groups (ethnic and religious) articulate their political ideas. A passive analysis of identity groups is not methodologically correct. Rather, the causal link between those groups and politics has to be identified and carefully analysed. A dynamic analysis, on which the various groups are treated as interest-seeking agent set against the state, is logical also in view of the new state-society formula of the post-Cold War era. Attahiru Jega glosses the new formula thus:

The myth of the strong, authoritarian state lording it over civil society has been shattered, and identities that were previously suppressed by the state, and perceived as politically irrelevant by several scholars, are now being reasserted and are becoming politically significant.⁷

Thus, despite its measure of perspicuity, the traditional ‘oppressive state/oppressed minority group’ model needs refinement, for identity politics has transformed certain ethnic and religious groups into interest-seeking agent types. As Richard A. Joseph reminds, identity politics is now a ‘mutually reinforcing interplay between identities and the pursuit of material benefits within the arena of competitive politics’.⁸ Ibrahim Kaya, following the same logic, asserts that:

New social movements based on cultural identities are far from representing the demands of groups for recognition. Rather, these movements aim at establishing hegemony by controlling the intellectual life of society by cultural means.⁹

This article takes the in-between perceptive, and does not conceive recognition and hegemony as opposite concepts. Instead, it perceives political action as a necessarily hegemony-seeking process, despite the absence of such an ambition among actors.

The study of identity politics in the Turkish case affirms this necessity, particularly in the light of post-1999 developments, in the interplay between the state and the various groups. It is a fact that Turkey’s dealings with the demands of these various groups, religious or ethnic, is hampered by structural deficits. Compared with the typical developed states, Turkey’s position is less well placed to satisfy its various groups (Islamist, Kurds, Assyrian Orthodox, etc.) demands. It therefore remains valid to study the state elites retention of their reservations about reformist agendas, such as the recognition of Kurdish as an official vernacular, or the permission to the Greek Orthodox Church to establish a seminary.

However, this axis, the state reluctant to recognize minority rights, is no longer the only dynamic that shapes identity politics in Turkey. There is now an emerging societal one: the will of the various ethnic and religious groups, which is equipped with political and economic instruments. Today, mayors who are members of the Democratic Society Party (the

⁷ Jega, Attahiru (2000): *Identity Transformation and Identity Politics under Structural Adjustment in Nigeria*, Stockholm, Elanders Gotab, p. 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁹ Kaya, Ibrahim: “Identity Politics: The Struggle for Recognition or Hegemony?”, *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 21, no. 4 (1997), p. 704.



Kurdish party) govern many major cities in the south-eastern parts of Turkey; Islamic religious groups such as the Fethullah Gülen movement, run major newspapers such as Zaman, a daily paper with a circulation of at least 800,000. This obliges attention to ethnic and religious groups' capacity to project their identity-based concerns into mainstream Turkish politics. More precisely: account has to be taken of the fact that identity politics in Turkey is now shaped according to two contending axes: that of the reluctant state and of the aspirant ethnic and religious groups.

3. The Periodisation of Identity Politics

The rise of the second axis, that of the interest-seeking agents of the various ethnic and religious groups, traces back to the late 90s. This makes necessary a periodisation of Turkish history as it was demarcated by identity politics. On this premise, it is historically correct to view the Republican period of Turkish history as containing two parts. The first part is the period that begins with the creation of the Turkish Republic in 1923 and ends in 1999. The second part is the period that began in 1999 and continues to evolve.

The traditional 'oppressive state/oppressed minority groups' model was dominant during the first period. The several sporadic cases notwithstanding, it was mainly the state's will and priorities that shaped identity politics at this time. Lacking the necessary domestic instruments and a supportive international conjecture, ultimate submission to the state was the only option for all ethnic and religious minorities. However, the logic of identity politics shifted gradually in the second period, especially after 1999, when ethnic and religious groups gained unprecedented leverage for articulating and defending their concerns.

The methodological explanation for demarcating this periodisation at the year 1999 is not mysterious:

1. This was the year when Turkey was recognized as a candidate for membership of the European Union, and the beginning of major reforms in Turkey.¹⁰ The European Union, having begun to exercise its legal capacity to oversee Turkey's reformation performances, requested that Turkey reorganise its political structure, including its state-society relations. Thus, the major aspects of identity politics, such as the Kurdish problem, the Christian groups and secularism-linked issues, become truly internationalised, losing their former purely domestic natures. The 1999 Helsinki Summit, which declared Turkey's European Union candidature, symbolised Turkey's entrance into the post-Cold War international community. As expected, the rise of a European component in Turkish politics had an enormous impact on identity politics. The new opportunity-structure in which the Islamic and Kurdish agents emerged as interest-seeking actors should be seen as the product of the European dimension. The European Union membership process provided the needed (to quote Meyer and Minkoff) 'factors exogenous' of Turkish identity politics.¹¹ In other words, the European Union membership process, by providing the favourable political conditions needed by ethnic and religious actors, completed the nexus between identity politics and its ideal environment.¹²

¹⁰ Sarigil, Zeki: "Europeanization as Institutional Change: The case of the Turkish Military", *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 12, no. 1 (March 2007), p. 40.

¹¹ Meyer, David S. and Minkoff, Debra C.: "Conceptualizing Political Opportunity", *Social Forces*, vol. 82, no. 4 (June 2004), p. 1633.

¹² Munson, Ziad: "Islamic Mobilization: Social Movement Theory and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood", *The Sociological Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 4 (2001), p. 494.



2. The year 1999 should be seen as marking the end of the Cold War period for Turkey. Unlike many Western states, the Cold War did not end for Turkey in 1989, as this state's elites continued to view the international system with Cold War lenses well into the 90s. Two major factors account for this: First, unlike many other states, no radical elite-change took place in Turkey at this time. The same group of political elites that had dominated Turkey during the Cold War remained in place during the post-1989 decade. The purge of Turkey's Cold War elites took place after 2000. Secondly, internal political instability kept Turkey apart from the international system. Between 1989-1999, nine different governments were established, and a military intervention troubled the political system in 1997. Naturally, political instability kept Turkey obsessed with its domestic problems.

3. Peripheral political actors, mainly Islamic ones, rose to prominence. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), founded by former Islamists who now declare themselves conservative democrats, won the 2002 elections, and they remain in power today. The AKP contributed to the transformation of identity politics in two major ways: (i) The AKP, whose origin is somehow religious, proposed a new type of modus vivendi between the state and Islam. In so doing, it has become a leading agent of identity politics; (ii) The Islamists, through the agency of the AKP, experienced a major denationalisation process in the assumption of the new position on the Kurdish issue. The Islamic groups of the past had a nationalist discourse on the Kurdish issue. In their former narrative, the PKK was labelled as the upshot of a larger Western conspiracy. Erbakan for example argued that the Poised Hammer was settled in Northern Iraq to protect the PKK. To him, certain Christian missionaries were also in cooperation with the PKK, as the latter sent the Kurdish kids to them for Christianization.¹³ Rather than analyzing the socioeconomic roots of the problem, the issue was narrated as a product of certain foreign conspiracies. Also the Islamists, like nationalists, denied any Kurdish demand for cultural rights for being detrimental to national unity. Having faced the serious outcomes of the highly militarized Kemalist regime in 1997, the Islamic elites changed their views on the Kurdish issue. The logic of the change was simple: First, The Islamists are persuaded that the Kurdish problem, which continues for more than two decades in which thousands of people were killed and billions of dollars were spent, became a source of legitimacy to the authoritarian rule in Turkey. Accordingly, the status quo regenerates itself politically, ideology and financially through the war with the Kurds. It was also a peerless opportunity for the army to involve routinely into the politics. Yet, the tension created by the problem was an effective instrument in the hands of the status quo in manipulating the public. Thus, the Islamic elites concluded that a political agenda, other than the military, is needed to stop the symbiotic relationship between the establishment and the Kurdish problem. Second, the Islamic actors also realized that the Kurds, as an oppressed group, were their natural ally and their political support should be gained. Thus a reformist agenda on the Kurdish issue was useful not only to prevent the establishment the utilization of the Kurdish issue as a pretext of authoritarianism but also to gain the Kurd's support.

The outcome was that after 1999, identity-politics is no longer directed by pure state priorities. Since then, religious and ethnic agents have emerged as interest-seeking actors and new partners in Turkish identity politics. Although the state and the state elites retain dominance, identity-politics has transformed into a kind of bargaining model in which various elites compete in accordance with their capacities. The former hierarchal universe of identity politics, in which the state had the ultimate authority to define the borders of the various identities and groups, has dissipated to the point that bargaining with identity groups has become a necessity. Thus, 'recognition' is the key difference between the pre- and post-1989

¹³ *Vakit*, 24 November 2007.



periods of identity politics in Turkey. The necessity of ‘recognition’ was certainly not welcomed. Rather, the state feels that it was forced upon it by domestic and international pressure. Be that as it may, the state has given up its control of identity politics, and accepted its role as ‘another agent’ in it. The image of the governor of Diyarbakır’s, a Kurdish city, watching a Kurdish theatre performance with the city’s mayor, a Kurdish Democratic Society Party member, symbolises this transformation.¹⁴

4. Explaining the Late Return

At this point, it is useful to analyse why and how Turkey was late in permitting the rise of the legitimate agent of identity politics. Pertinent to this analysis is an examination of how and why the state elites retain their reservations about liberalising the identity market. Richard Maansbach and Edward Rhodes propose three factors to explain the ‘capacity and inclination of states to tolerate multiple identities’.¹⁵ The first factor is historical timing: ‘States whose institutional capacity developed ahead of national identity appear to have had less difficulty accommodating identity politics peacefully.’¹⁶ The second factor is regime type: ‘... the capacity of states to cope non-violently with identity politics is liberal democracy’.¹⁷ The third factor is institutional legitimacy: ‘...the degree to which the state’s internal legitimacy is based on some appeal other than nationalism – for example, is based on claims to represent a particular class or religion’.¹⁸

Once Turkey is analyzed with these three factors as the terms of reference, it becomes obvious that Turkey has genuine systemic excuses on each factor. The Turkish Republic was created in 1923, and was forced to create its nation simultaneously. Thus, Turkey was relatively weak in terms of institutional capacity. The early Republican elite had the task of institutional consolidation along with nation building. The lack of institutional capacity increased the fears of the early Republican elites. In terms of the second, (the ‘regime’) factor, Turkey has never had a liberal polity. Instead, various types of authoritarian regime have always dominated the country.¹⁹ Finally, the Republican project declared nationalism almost the most important claimant to legitimacy. The founding fathers of the Republic were hostile to both religion and class. In the program of the Republican People’s Party (CHP), the Kemalist party that ruled Turkey between 1923 and 1950, ‘nation’ was defined without a class reference. In other words, the Republican order was classless. According to the program, the populace [halkçılar] had no class or community affiliations.²⁰

To conclude: Turkey lacked for a long period of time the political and institutional capacity to develop an identity politics. Along with the ideological bias of the ruling elite, their political and institutional weaknesses made difficult to accommodate an identity politics.

¹⁴ *Radikal*, 27 February 2010.

¹⁵ Maansbach, Richard and Rhodes, Edward: “The National State and Identity Politics: State Institutionalization and Markers of National Identity”, *Geopolitics*, vol. 12 (2007), p. 439.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 440.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, *Idem*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 441.

¹⁹ Dodd, C. H.: “The Development of Turkish Democracy”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1992), p. 28.

²⁰ Toprak, Zafer: “Türkiye’de Sol Faşizm ya da Otoriter Modernizm 1923-1946”, Speech delivered at the Ottoman Bank Archive and Research Center, 27 May 2006, p. 6.



5. Agents and Agendas: The Patterns of Adaptation

In line with the foregoing analysis of periodisation, a short analysis of some ethnic and religious groups will shed light on the general dynamics of Turkish identity politics, particularly in the post-1999 period. It is hardly possible to summarise how all the various sub-national groups have risen as interest-seeking actors in the identity-politics market, given that Turkey embraces many different ethnic and religious groups. Thus, a selective reading based on representative cases: Islamic groups, Kurds and Armenians are presented below.

6. Islamic Groups: The Champions of the State-System

The Islamist WP finished the 1995 parliamentary elections as the largest party with 21 percent. Necmettin Erbakan, the leader of WP, became Prime Minister in 1996 in coalition with True Path Party, a centre-right party. As expected, the Erbakan-led coalition government quickly incited the sensitivity of secular groups. Soon, Turkish politics fell into chaotic disarray. Despite the Erbakan government was relatively successful in economy; it gradually lost the control over civil and military bureaucracy. The army became publicly an opposition power. The bureaucratic opposition was accompanied by a strong media campaign against the government. An unprecedented political chaos dominated the Turkish politics. In 1997, Turkey was on the eve of a military intervention. The daily public warnings to Erbakan-led government by the Turkish army became a normal part of politics. Finally, the military increased the harshness and forced the government to resign in 1997 after a famous National Security Council meeting on 28 February. On 18 June 2007, Erbakan resigned; but it did not stop the army activism. In the same year, the National Security Policy Document was amended and Islamic threat was declared as the number one threat replacing the former Kurdish separatism. Although the parliament was not dissolved, the WP was closed down by the Constitutional Court for being anti-secular and its leadership cadre including Erbakan was banned from politics. The other coalition partner the Truth Path Party was divided due to the strong military pressure and a new government was formed to cohabitate with the de facto military rule till 1999. As “the military entrenched itself deeper in the political system while ingeniously maintaining a façade of democracy, including multiparty politics, on-time local elections”²¹, the 28 February was a different military intervention. Instead of direct rule, the army preferred a rule through civilian associates such as the media, the bureaucracy, the army backed government and even the courts, which was thus named as the post-modern coup.²²

The two-year period was truly a traumatic period for Islamists as the targets of the army-led campaign. To avert the Islamic threat, the army-led coalition realized numberless plans from banning headscarf to hindering the university education for the graduates of Imam Hatip schools. Trade firms known for their Islamist owners were punished and deprived from state originated financial opportunities. The public sphere due to repressive conditions gradually became intolerant to Islamists as the military led campaign attempted to reorganize the Turkish politics in toto to purge the Islamic threat.

To summarize under separate titles, the 28 February process was unique for the Islamists for several reasons: To begin with, it was the first direct military intervention targeting the Islamic groups. In the past, Islamic groups faced serious problems during the

²¹ Çandar, Cengiz: “Redefining Turkey’s Political Center”, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 10, no. 4 (1999), p. 130.

²² Özel, Soli: “After Tsunami”, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 10, no. 4 (1999), p. 86.



military rules. However, the WP-led government was directly targeted in 1997. Yet, the whole process aimed to purge the Islamic threat. Again, the WP was the only party that was closed down during the intervention. Second, as a post-modern intervention, it did not happen as a classical coup; instead it continued for relatively long time which traumatized the process for masses. Sophisticated media campaigns against the Islamists including the religious orders and movements created a shock effect for large masses. The intervention did not come as a sudden and short shock, instead it continued for some time. Third, not only Islamic elites, large masses of Islamic groups faced serious interventions even in their daily lives, which also traumatized the process. Ordinary Islamic person faced direct constraints of the military intervention: Headscarf ban at the universities, police hunting ultra-religious people dressed according to their tariqat traditions in various districts even in Istanbul, official boycotts of trade firms owned by Islamic groups, the closure of many religious dormitories and seminaries.

The 28 February process forced the Islamic elites to adopt a new strategy to avert the militant secular attack. Witnessing their humiliating weakness, the Islamic elites realized that a new strategy was needed to overcome the current troubles they face. The process itself was taken as a proof to show how the former strategies were futile. The Islamists, lacking needed networks in different fields such as economy, discovered that they were completely naked against the sophisticated secular bloc. Yet, the 28 February process made the divisions among the Islamic elites more visible. A new generation came to the fore who also criticized the traditional leaders such as Erbakan for failing in understanding the global changes and causing the defeat in 1997.

In consequence, in the post-1997 period, the Islamists developed a new strategy which has two major pillars: First, the former narrative which always questioned the legitimacy of globalism, market economy, media and even democracy was left behind. Instead, creating new instrumental capacity in all fields became the major purpose. They developed a new strategy which emphasized becoming active in various fields such as market and media in which they used to have reservations before. They always kept in mind that the lack of such instrumental capacity led to their defeat in 1997. Second, they studied carefully how and why the secular establishment is positioned vis-a-vis the Kurdish issue, the Cyprus issue, globalization, the EU membership. They realized that they had paradoxically defended the same theses of the secular establishment even against their own interest. They discovered that certain major processes such as globalization or Turkey's membership to the EU, despite some troubles, had the potential of creating remarkable opportunity spaces for them and simultaneously had the potential of weakening the secular establishment. It was the pragmatic tactic of Islamic elites that forced them to enjoy EU-originated opportunities to stop the militant secular attack.²³ As Turkey was given the status of candidate country in 1999, the complex European *acquis communautaire* quickly began to show its transformative effects into politics. Simultaneously, the Islamic elites discovered how the EU pressure into Turkey created important opportunity spaces for them by forcing the Turkish state to make radical reforms to enhance democratic rule. They were also fully aware of the lack of a domestic dynamic that could substitute the EU. Indeed, their reading was correct as it was the EU originated dynamics that later caused major reforms in Turkish politics including the

²³ Bacik, Gokhan: "The Transformation of the Muslim Self and the Development of a New Discourse on Europe: The Turkish Case", *International Review of Sociology*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2001), p. 29.



reorganization of civil-military relations.²⁴ Compared with domestic dynamics, the EU originated dynamics have a more transformative effect.²⁵

7. The Kurds: Party People vs. Partisan²⁶

Turkey's Kurdistan Labor Party (PKK) launched its insurgency in 1984. The PKK's roots struck in the 60s and the 70s, when "the secularization of the Kurdish identity within the broader leftist movement in Turkey" took place.²⁷ In the 60s, the Kurdish elites began to appropriate a leftist, mainly socialist, discourse. The incompetence of the traditional Kurdish leaders should be noted as a facilitator of the rise of the left among the Kurds. Since the traditional landowner elites were in a sense co-opted to block reformist Kurdish activism, the demand for a new class of elites paved the way for the rise of leftist ideologies.²⁸ In consequence, the former tribal and religious leaders were gradually replaced by the "new modern intellectuals."²⁹

The traditional religious (like the Naqshbandiyyah order) and the tribal elites used to sketch the dominant lines of the cultural pattern of the Kurdish provinces. However, the inability of the traditional leaders, who had close religious ties, to champion the Kurdish cause against the state paved the way for the new, modern Kurdish elites who were attuned to secular ideas like socialism. Meanwhile, the exile of many Kurdish tribal and other high-profile Kurds in Western Turkey, after the 1960 coup d'état, strengthened the modern elites leverage.³⁰ Gradually, leftist ideologies became dominant, particularly among the young Kurds. It was not a coincidence that the Turkish Labour Party (TİP) and its Marxist program quickly became a leading institution for Kurds. Symbolizing its cooperation with the Kurds, the TİP announced its recognition of the Kurds of Turkey at the 1970 party congress.

Another important event was the Doğu Mitingleri (East Meetings) organized in major Kurdish cities between 1968 and 1969. As part of these meetings, the Kurds appeared on the streets to express their demands. This led to the creation of the Revolutionary Cultural Centers of the East (DDKO) in 1969. These centers took a mainly socialist perspective of the Kurd's problems. They were active until 1971, when they were closed down by the military regime. Abdullah Öcalan, the founder of the PKK, took part in DDKO activities. These activities, which "blended with Marxism and Kurdish nationalism" influenced Öcalan and many young Kurds.³¹ Kurdish activism of the 60s had meanwhile significantly stimulated Kurdish intellectual activity. Several Kurdish periodicals, and journalists such as İleri Yurt,

²⁴ Michaud-Emin, L.: "The Restructuring of the Military High Command in the Seventh Harmonization Package and its Ramifications for Civil-Military Relations in Turkey", *Turkish Studies*, vol. 8, no. (2008), pp. 25-42.

²⁵ Smith, Thomas W.: "Civic Nationalism and Ethnocultural Justice in Turkey", *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 27 (2005), p. 450.

²⁶ In writing this part, I have largely depended on another study. See: Bacik, Gokhan and Balamir Coşkun, Bezen: "The PKK Problem: Explaining Turkey's Failure to Develop a Political Solution", paper in progress 2010.

²⁷ Yavuz, Hakan: "Five stages of the construction of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey", *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, vol. 7, no. 3 (2001), p. 2.

²⁸ Hanish, Shak: "Book Review: David Romano's The Kurdish Nationalist Movement Opportunities, Mobilization and Identity", *Domes*, vol. 16, no. 1 (Spring, 2007), p. 170.

²⁹ See Yavuz, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

³⁰ Güneş, Cengiz: "Kurdish Politics in Turkey: A Quest for Identity," *International Journal of Kurdish Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1/2 (2007), p. 20.

³¹ See Yavuz, *op. cit.*, p. 10.



Dicle Firat, Deng, Reya, Roja and Newe, were published. A Kurdish grammar book appeared in 1965, and the famous Kurdish epic, Mem u Zin, was translated into Turkish in 1968.³²

Deeply influenced by the left-leaning atmosphere of its time, the PKK was founded in November 1978 as a clandestine organization advocating the liberation of Kurdistan from Turkey. The social basis of the PKK, like that of other leftist Kurdish groups, was the people of the lower strata of society. Unlike the traditional Kurdish elites who were linked to the large landowning families, the PKK was the product of Kurds who came from poor families, among them Öcalan. Its intellectual basis was a Marxist-Leninist one. Like other Kurdish groups, PKK members approached the problems of Kurds with a class-based analysis. Thus, PKK's first and major criticism was directed at the traditional/feudal Kurdish system. Unlike many other Kurdish groups, the PKK defended the idea of separation. In the 1977 party program, the PKK claimed that Kurdistan, divided into four regions by four separate colonist countries (Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria), should be independent and united. In all its earlier documents, the PKK had called for an independent state for Kurds.³³

However, the separatist nature of the PKK subsided gradually after 1999, for two reasons: First, the leader of the PKK, Öcalan, was arrested and imprisoned in 1999, which transformed the PKK in a 'process of implicit bargaining' that began between the state and the PKK.³⁴ Secondly, the Turkish state adopted a more moderate agenda on the Kurdish issue, recognising that non-military instruments are also vital in dealing with it. In August 2009, the AKP government declared a new Kurdish initiative, one that aims to solve the problem by political means, of which indirect negotiation with the Kurdish rebels is one. Dramatically, a number of PKK members returned to Turkey, and there was no move to arrest them. The government's initiative includes several major projects, all of them capable of being political tactics: the bringing home of thousands of Kurds who had left Turkey for Iraq for reason of the struggle between the PKK and the Turkish authorities; the establishment of Kurdish teaching university programs; the restoring of the Kurdish names of villages and cities; the reduction of military patrols in the Kurdish region; amnesty for middle and low-level PKK fighters; the liberalization of media laws to encourage Kurdish-language broadcasts; the establishing of Kurdish as an elective course in secondary and high schools; the recognition of the freedom to use Kurdish election-campaign materials and to deliver Kurdish mosque sermons; the purchasing of Kurdish books for public libraries; and the employment of Kurdish-speaking religious leaders and policemen in the Kurdish region.³⁵ The army has backed the AKP's Kurdish initiative by keeping an affirmative silence. It has even signed the National Security Council Declarations, which justifies the government's Kurdish initiative. The state has given out strong signals of having become more open to political solution. The army endorsed it by its silence, and did not refrain from approving it through the National Security Council declarations which called for non-military solutions to the Kurdish problem.

The transformation of the state's approach to the Kurdish issue has created certain problems for the Kurdish movement. To begin with, the internal separation of the Kurdish movement as party people (those who are active under the umbrella of the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party) and as 'partisans' (PKK fighters) has created a tension within the Kurdish movement. For the partisans, the party people are corrupt political elites who had abused the

³² See Güneş, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

³³ Marcus, Aliza (2007): *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, New York and London, New York University Press, p. 28.

³⁴ Gunter, Michael M.: "The Continuing Kurdish problem in Turkey after Öcalan's capture", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 5 (2000), p. 857.

³⁵ *Zaman*, August 27, 2009.



Kurdish masses for a long period of time in a painstaking struggle. A partisan spends time in the mountains, whereas party people enjoy the luxury of their offices in parliament or local government. For party people, the partisan is a devoted man, but one who fails to recognise the realities of the political milieu. More critical is the party people new political discourse, which has the potential to diverge from that of the partisan. Thus, it has become a major agenda of the PKK to obstruct the development of a completely independent Kurdish political movement.

From the very beginning, the PKK has striven to keep all relevant institutions under its strict control, and forbidden the rise of any autonomous Kurdish organization. First, the organizational schema that supports the Öcalan cult does not permit even moderately critical ideas. Öcalan's authority over the PKK is unquestionable. Marcus has called this the "Öcalan's cult of personality." Öcalan himself does not shy away from ordering the killing of one or another of the PKK's higher-level leaders if that protects his consolidated position. According to Marcus, "between 1983 and 1985, he ordered or encouraged the murder of at least 11 high-level former or current PKK members."³⁶ And, as Cline notes, "His charisma and willingness to ruthlessly suppress any internal leadership challenges led to his undisputed command of the group."³⁷ Thus, as Özcan argues, "a Soviet-like bureaucracy that was most loyal to the leadership" became the main ruling mechanism within the PKK.³⁸ To avoid losing their control of it, unofficial PKK members (dubbed "the commissars") always accompany the Kurdish politicians who address the people.³⁹ The political elites are rigorously checked out by these PKK members. Also, it should be noted that the Kurdish politicians have been relatively disinclined to autonomous political behaviour, mainly for fear of losing local Kurdish support. Another factor of this is the paradoxical transfer of traditional patterns of leadership from Kurdish culture to the PKK. Despite its discursive criticism of "feudal" Kurdish patterns, the PKK is, particularly in its chain of command, a typical Kurdish organization in which the authority of the higher-placed over the lower-placed is conceded as a sacred fact. Yaşar Kaya, a former member of the DEP, once said; "Öcalan is not a god; the Kurds should feel free to criticize anyone."⁴⁰ However, it is a rare case, as the Kurdish movement has largely been a loyal one, repeating the conformist patterns of the Kurdish traditional movement. In short, the Kurdish political elites have not shown the courage to challenge the Kurdish status quo. Even moderate Kurdish politicians such as Ahmet Türk, the head of the banned DTP, and Osman Baydemir, the Mayor of Diyarbakır, have never directly criticized the PKK. Indeed, the moderate Ahmet Türk publicly confirmed that Öcalan's "advice" determines their behaviours. The impotence of the Kurdish politicians has been criticized by other Kurdish groups in Iraqi Kurdistan. During a visit, the Iraqi Kurds publicly criticized the Turkish Kurds for their ultra-submissive behaviours.⁴¹

8. The Armenians: The Politics of Exception

The Treaty of Lausanne recognised only one minority group in Turkey: non-Muslims (gayr-i müslimler).⁴² Paradoxically, the population exchange with Greece and further nation-building

³⁶ See Marcus, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

³⁷ Cline, Lawrence E.: "From Ocalan to Al Qaida: The Continuing Terrorist Threat in Turkey", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 27 (2004), p. 327.

³⁸ See Özcan, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

³⁹ *Taraf*, December 28, 2009.

⁴⁰ *Milliyet*, December 28, 2009.

⁴¹ *Radikal*, December 23, 2009.

⁴² See Oran, *op. cit.*



policies Islamised Anatolia to an unprecedented level. It will not be an exaggeration to argue that Kemalist Turkey outstripped the Ottomans at Islamizing the Anatolian people. As much as 99 percent of the Republic is now Islamised. According to the 1927 census, the number of Armenians in Turkey was around 140,000.⁴³ However, non-official sources suggest that that number was not less than 300,000.⁴⁴ Thus, the Islamisation of the land was the major parameter of Armenians' adaptation to the post-Ottoman order.

The second factor was the political articulation of the so-called Armenian Massacre. Ironically, Republican Turkey has declared the defence of the Ottomans on this matter an official duty. The young Republic developed an anti-Ottoman historiography to legitimize itself, but was selective when it came to this Armenian issue. As expected, tension over this item of history put the Armenians into a troubled context. The debate on it was instrumentalised by the Anatolian Armenians and the Diaspora Armenians. Sarkis Seropyan, owner of the Armenian newspaper *Agos*, figuratively described this tense position as "awaiting the quake".⁴⁵

During the late 70s, a surge of Armenian (mainly ASALA) terrorist attacks on Turkish diplomats abroad put the domestic Armenians under great pressure. These attacks persuaded the Armenian community to prefer a highly isolated communal life centred in Istanbul as a major self-defence strategy. In other words, the sustained focus on the so-called Armenian Massacre gradually forced the Anatolian Armenians into an isolated community life. Politically, for long years, the Armenian community supported secular parties such as the Republican People's Party. This was a strategy to prevent the rise of Islamist and nationalist parties. Also, the Armenians never sought a high profile in the ongoing debate of the alleged massacre, choosing instead to avoid prioritising this sensitive issue. Silence was their strategy, here.

The major development that changed the traditional setting of the Anatolian Armenians was Turkey's new policy towards Armenia in the late 2000s. The government first permitted direct flights to Yerevan from Istanbul. (Meanwhile, the number of Armenian workers, most of whom are in Turkey illegally, has reached almost 70,000.)⁴⁶ The rationale of this shift in Turkey was simple: Direct contact with Armenia was expected to tame the Armenian Diaspora, which is troublesome in the US and Europe. The Turkish political elites thought that improving relations with Armenia may help them counterbalance the influence abroad of this Diaspora.

In 2008, the Turkish President Abdullah Gül visited Armenia to watch the football match between Turkey and Armenia. Armenian President Sarkisian visited Turkey for the return match. This high-level direct contact, the football diplomacy, was indeed a historic development. Both countries then began a complex diplomatic process to negotiate a wide agenda, which included the opening of the Turkish-Armenian border. In 2009, both countries signed a protocol that envisages a medium-term solution of bilateral problems, among them the opening of the border between Turkey and Armenia. Indeed, this rapprochement between two states eased the political atmosphere for the Armenians in Turkey. The Armenian community welcomed the developments. As expected, Turkey's new approach to Armenia, designed mainly by the AKP government, has updated the Armenians' political orientation.

⁴³ Demirel, Muammer: "Türkiye'de Kalan Ermeni Nüfus", *Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Dergisi*, vol. 62 (July, 2005), p. 34.

⁴⁴ *Radikal*, 23 May 2005.

⁴⁵ *Sabah*, 16 September 2010.

⁴⁶ *Radikal*, 25 December 2009.



The Armenian community, which had aligned with the secular CHP in the past, has now made the AKP its new political address. Left-leaning intellectuals with a tradition of connection with in the Armenian community also played a role in this transformation.⁴⁷

However, it was the shocking assassination of Hrant Dink, a leading Armenian intellectual that changed the structure of the general settings that contain the Armenian-linked issues. Hrant Dink, who wrote for *Agos*, was killed in 2007. The strong public reaction to the event, including that of the large Turkish masses, was unexpected. The Turkish public strongly denounced the murder of a popular Armenian intellectual. Thousands of Turks bearing 'we are all Armenians' placards appeared at Dink's funeral. The political and social atmosphere created by the funeral unexpectedly paved the way for a new political setting. It can be noted that the murder of Dink became a landmark in the modern history of Turkish-Armenian relations. Political representatives from Yerevan were also present at the funeral. Crowded meetings also protested Dink's murder. The atmosphere that Dink's murder created reminded of the complex historical bonds between the Turks and Armenians, despite the traumatic events in the early 20th century.

Despite their reduced number, the Armenians in Turkey now have unparalleled political and symbolic significance in the power configurations of Turkish politics. To begin with, the Armenian issue gives the AKP government a corridor along which it is comparatively easy to propagate a reformist agenda. Secondly, in the rise of the AKP as a reformist party that promotes pro-Armenian reforms in Turkey, the Armenian connection is symbolically and strategically critical, given the AKP's controversial relationship with religion in the past. Thirdly, the AKP's comparatively liberal agenda regarding the Armenian community helps it maintain a co-operative contact with the Marxist/leftist intellectuals, which is a politically very strategic contact.

9. Conclusion

Identity politics in post-1999 Turkey has two competing axes: the state and various interest-seeking groups. The various religious and ethnic groups find now a suitable political market in which they can imprint their interests on the official decision making process. The liberalisation of the public sphere, due mainly to Turkey's European Union candidature, strengthened the various sub-national identities. In a post-imperial society, such liberalisation is not limited to the Islamic groups or the Armenians. Many other important identities, such as the Alewi, the Roma and Eastern-rite Christians, have also agendas. The government has launched several initiatives (*açılım*) with regard the Alewi and the Roma, in order to focus on their problems. Indeed, the rise of identity politics in Turkey has produced a centrifugal force that requires the structural transformation of the idea of Turkishness. So far, Turkey has presented itself as a Muslim-Sunni-Turkish-secular nation. With the rise of non-state agents such Islamic groups, Kurds and Armenians, identity politics poses new challenges to one or several parts of this traditional formula. Armenians are not Muslim, Alewis are not Sunni, Kurds are not Turks, and some Islamic groups are not satisfactorily secular. Thus, the critical question is whether Turkey can fabricate a new political profile that can include all the sub-national identities. Such an ambitious agenda requires the articulation of a more civic definition of citizenship, which, ironically, suggests an updated Ottomanisation of Turkey.

⁴⁷ Mahçupyan, Etyen: "Ermeni Oyları AKP ve Baskın Oran'a", *ANKA Agency*, 12 July 2008.