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Sebnem Gumuscu ^a & Deniz Sert ^b

^a University of Virginia

^b Koc University

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The March 2009 Local Elections and the Inconsistent Democratic Transformation of the AKP Party in Turkey

SEBNEM GUMUSCU* & DENİZ SERT**

*University of Virginia

**Koc University

The *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party, or AKP) was established in 2001 by a group of former members of the *Milli Görüş* movement (National Outlook, or MG) as a conservative–democratic party.¹ Known as the *yenilikçiler* (those who seek novelty), a group of moderates seceded from the Islamist MG and proclaimed that they were establishing a ‘moderate and democratic’ party. This was an important turning point not only in the history of Turkish Islamism, but also in the trajectory of political Islam in Muslim societies. The AKP with its platform based on economic and political liberalism and social conservatism managed to garner a plurality of votes in its first general election in 2002. With 34 percent of the ballot and 366 of the total 550 seats in the parliament, the AKP came to power. Two years later, in 2004, the AKP participated in its first municipal elections and succeeded in increasing its share of the vote to 42 percent. In the second general elections in 2007, the party achieved a phenomenal political success by increasing its share of votes to 46.6 percent. In the following 20 months, however, Turkish political life experienced several crises, including the case asking the Constitutional Court to ban the AKP on grounds that it was not a genuine secular party as laws required political parties to be, debates over a new ‘civil’ constitution, a new court case against the ‘deep state,’² and many corruption allegations against the incumbent party. Consequently, in the municipal elections of March 2009, the AKP, for the first time in its short history, suffered a substantial loss in support, with its share of the vote declining to 39 percent.³

Correspondence Address: Sebnem Gumuscu, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA. Email: sg6d@virginia.edu.
Deniz Sert, Koc University, Rumeli Feneri Yolu, 34450 Sariyer, Istanbul, Turkey. Email: dsert@ku.edu.tr

¹ For a detailed discussion, see H. Yavuz (2009) *Secularism and Muslim Democracy in Turkey*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); S. Gumuscu (2010) Class, Status, and Party: The Changing Face of Political Islam in Turkey and Egypt, *Comparative Political Studies*, forthcoming.

² The court case known as ‘Ergenekon’ involves several military officers, journalists, civil society activists and professors who are accused of conspiring against the AKP government and preparing a *coup d’etat*. For a detailed account of the case see S. Tayyar (2008) *Operasyon Ergenekon* [Operation Ergenekon] (Istanbul: Timas).

³ Turkish Statistical Institute (2009) 2009 Local Elections. Available at <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr>, accessed 10 December 2009.

Table 1. Number of municipalities won by major parties in 2004 and 2009

Party	2004			2009		
	Metropolis	City	Town	Metropolis	City	Town
AKP	12	46	483	10	35	447
CHP	2	6	130	3	10	170
MHP	0	4	72	1	9	129
DTP	1	3	32	1	7	50

Unlike other parties on the Turkish political scene, the AKP has been able to draw electoral support from all provinces in the country. For example, in the March 2009 elections, as in the preceding ones, the AKP competed with the *Demokratik Toplum Partisi* (Democratic Society Party, or DTP) in the regions with majority Kurdish populations, with the *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* (Nationalist Action Party, or MHP) in conservative central Anatolia, and with the *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (Republican People's Party, or CHP) in western Turkey and metropolitan areas. Yet, in that election the AKP lost some of its earlier support to all three of the aforementioned parties (see Table 1).

Soon after the March 2009 municipal elections, many pundits claimed that the results were due to a 'normalization' process that the electorate had undergone. According to this view, the 2007 election results were 'abnormal,' because the electoral base of the AKP could not be as large as 46.6 percent.⁴ We disagree with such explanations for two reasons. First, such explanations ignore an essential characteristic of democracy, namely the idea that elections are opportunities for the electorate to assess the performance of incumbent governments. The assumption that there are 'normal' vote-shares for each party in multiparty political systems betrays a fundamental lack of understanding about democratic processes. Second, such a perspective cannot explain political change or define political 'abnormality.' Simply put, parties do not receive the same percentage of votes in every election. Instead of such an essentialist explanation, we believe that an analysis of a party's principles, objectives and policies is necessary to understand its success and failure in elections. In a similar vein, we argue that the AKP's success in the 2007 elections was due to its effective economic and political management during its first term in office, while inconsistencies in its economic, political and social policies in the second term led to a decline in its support in the 2009 municipal elections. A comparative analysis of the two terms also enables us to engage with the debate as to whether the AKP is an Islamist party. This analysis reveals that the party is indeed not an Islamist party. However, its inconsistencies, particularly in the political and social realms, also indicate that the AKP has not yet become a liberal democratic party either. The period between the two elections has shown that the AKP in Turkey oscillates between conservatism and liberal pluralism, and it still needs time to complete its democratic transformation.

⁴ See, for example, E. Katircioglu, *Secimler, kimlikler ve yeni siyaset* [Elections, identities and new politics], *Taraf Newspaper*, April 2, 2009.

Origins of the AKP

When the AKP was established in 2001, the founders defined it as a conservative democratic party that promotes a free market economic system with minimal state intervention in the economy, democratization and liberalization of the polity, and conservatism in the society.⁵ The leaders of the new party claimed insistently that they had taken off the MG ‘shirt,’ and at every opportunity denounced their Islamist background.⁶ As we will show below, the AKP indeed has departed from the MG line and adopted a path with respect to the role of religion in politics, the perception of democracy, and human rights and freedoms that is different from that of the MG. Moreover, coming to power in 2002, the AKP has pursued, designed, and implemented significantly different economic, social and foreign policies compared with those of the MG, and the party, as laid out in its program and official statements, strongly rejects Islamism as a social, economic and political project.⁷ For the AKP, Islam is a religion that comprises norms and values that render life meaningful for devout Muslims, but it is not an ideology and thus cannot be offered as a solution for the economic, political and social problems that confront society. The party program states that its central political project is composed of two main goals: economic development and growth, and expansion of human rights and freedoms within the broader aim of consolidating democracy.⁸ According to the AKP, religion plays no explicit role in the attainment of these goals.

In contrast to the MG, which puts community before the individual, the AKP program declares that the main goal of the party is to consolidate democracy and to protect human rights and freedoms by placing the individual at the center of the political process.⁹ In the AKP platform the primacy of community and the ethical order are left to individuals and their rights. Accordingly, the AKP approaches the issue of human rights and freedoms from a liberal perspective. In its central motto, ‘No one is free unless everyone is free,’ the AKP communicates the message that it is concerned with all freedoms and rights of every citizen.¹⁰ In line with a liberal understanding, the party urges the adoption of internationally accepted standards of human rights as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, and the Helsinki Final Act.¹¹

The AKP also is distinct in its approach toward political pluralism and political competition among parties. For example, it sees political parties as civic organizations that communicate individuals’ demands to the state while competing for power to address these demands.¹² Furthermore, it views political parties as integral parts of a well-functioning democracy, because they compete for power, and democracies function as

⁵ See AKP Party Program for details. Available at: <http://eng.akparti.org.tr/english/partyprogramme.html>, accessed 8 December 2009.

⁶ In a 2003 interview published in a Turkish daily, Tayyip Erdogan, the leader of the party, stated that they have taken off the *Milli Gorus* shirt; see Interview with Tayyip Erdogan, *Yeni Safak*, December 12, 2003.

⁷ U. Tekin (2004) *AK Partinin Muhafazakar Demokrat Kimligi* [The conservative-democratic identity of the AKP] (Ankara: Orient), p. 111.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 143; see also the AKP Party Program, Introduction, pp. 5–9.

⁹ AKP Program, pp. 7–8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

healthy systems only in the presence of this competition. Moreover, success in this competition does not deliver absolute power to the winners. The parties have to respect the freedoms and rights of the minorities, and these rights should be brought under constitutional guarantees.¹³

In addition to changes that it has adopted in its democracy, pluralism and human rights discourse, the AKP also has diverted from the MG line in terms of policy. The AKP has emerged as an ardent supporter of Turkey's accession to the European Union (EU), presenting a stark break from the MG, an overt critic of the EU. Moreover, the AKP adopted economic and political liberalism and aimed to reduce the size of the state so that it only fulfills very basic functions such as defense, basic education and provision of law and order while it leaves economic, political and social realms to free markets and the private sector, local governments and civil society organizations. In this respect, the AKP breaks with the statist line of the MG which upholds state interventionism in several aspects of economic, social and political life. Thus, the AKP program and election manifestos indicate a clear break with the MG tradition.¹⁴

AKP Performance in Power

Particularly in its first term in office, the AKP government acted in conformity with what it had promised in its party program. Economic growth and privatization were priorities of the party in this period. The government carried out large privatization schemes, stabilized macroeconomic indicators, kept inflation and the budget deficit low and successfully attracted foreign direct investment. Following a major financial crisis that broke out in 2001, the party in its first term in office (2002–2007) displayed a remarkable economic success, with the Turkish economy growing on average 6.8 percent per year. Meanwhile, exports increased from US \$45 billion in 2002 to US \$107 billion in 2007.¹⁵

It was this phenomenal success upon which the AKP built its election campaign in 2007. In his speeches, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan often cited numbers that indicated how successful his government had been in its first term. Thus, it was not so surprising in July 2007 when the AKP received 46.6 percent of the votes. Indeed, many scholars contended that the primary cause of the AKP's electoral success was due to its success in economic management.¹⁶ At least one study involving pre- and post-election surveys showed that the

¹³ Ibid., pp. 25–26.

¹⁴ S. Gumuscu & D. Sert (2009) The Power of the Devout Bourgeoisie: The Case of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 4(6), pp. 953–968.

¹⁵ It has to be noted that the Minister of State in the preceding government, Kemal Dervis, carried out significant structural reforms to strengthen the Turkish economy in the aftermath of the 2001 financial crisis. These reforms and the stand-by agreements with the IMF created a healthy Turkish economy that could benefit from the expanding global economy between 2002 and 2007. In that respect, the AKP government benefitted substantially from Dervis's reforms in attaining economic growth. See further, E. Yeldan (2002) On the IMF-Directed Disinflation Program in Turkey: A Program for Stabilization and Austerity or a Recipe for Impoverishment and Financial Chaos?, in: N. Balkan & S. Savran (eds) *The Ravages of Neo-liberalism: Economy, Society, and Gender in Turkey* (New York: Nova Science Publishers). For the statistics, see Turkish Statistical Institute. Available at <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr>, accessed 9 December 2009.

¹⁶ See, for example, A. Carkoglu (2008) Ideology or Economic Pragmatism? Profiling Turkish Voters in 2007, *Turkish Studies*, 9(2), pp. 317–344.

primary reason why people voted for the AKP in 2007 was in fact economic pragmatism, particularly people with less than a high school education.¹⁷

Also during its first term, the AKP government took several steps to consolidate democracy, improve human rights and expand freedoms, measures undertaken to take Turkey closer to EU membership. For instance, the AKP passed two constitutional amendments (in 2002 and 2004) and enacted five laws that included several legislative changes designed to harmonize Turkish law with EU standards.¹⁸ To ‘civilianize’ and consolidate democracy in the country, the AKP government abolished the controversial State Security Courts, made changes to the organization of the National Security Council¹⁹ and its responsibilities in some state institutions²⁰ and narrowed the scope of the military courts. To safeguard human rights and freedoms, the government accepted the supremacy of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) over domestic jurisdiction, thus acknowledging the citizen’s right to a retrial in cases where the ECHR might rule a penalty imposed by the Turkish courts conflicted with the European Convention on Human Rights.

For further expansion of basic rights and freedoms, the AKP government abolished the death penalty for all crimes, lifted the ban against broadcasting in languages other than Turkish and facilitated instruction in native languages other than Turkish. To further the freedom of expression, the government repealed a controversial clause in the law against terrorism, made it harder to ban political parties and broadened the freedom of association by lifting the obstacles to establishing and joining associations. To enhance gender equality, the AKP government amended the Constitution and introduced the clause that ‘women and men have equal rights before the law’ and increased the penalties in the penal code for honor crimes committed against women. Finally, to coordinate further steps to improve the human rights regime, the prime minister appointed a minister who would oversee improvements in human rights. All these steps taken by the AKP during its first term in office enabled Turkey to secure candidacy status to the EU, and in 2005, the accession talks officially began.²¹

All these political and economic achievements contributed to the AKP’s political success in the July 2007 elections, when it increased its share of the popular vote to nearly 47 percent and won 340 of the 550 parliament seats.²² The AKP managed to attract votes from very diverse groups, including liberals, nationalists and conservatives. Nationalists and conservatives are among the primary constituency of the party, and with its economic performance the AKP managed to defeat other nationalist and conservative

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 317–344.

¹⁸ On the EU harmonization process, see Republic of Turkey Prime Ministry Secretariat General for EU Affairs. Available at <http://www.abgs.gov.tr>, accessed 12 December 2009.

¹⁹ One such step was to appoint a civilian secretary to the *Milli Güvenlik Kurulu* (National Security Council, or MGK).

²⁰ For instance, before these changes the MGK had a right to appoint a member to the Board of the Higher Education Institute and the Higher Board of Radio and Television Broadcasting.

²¹ For measures taken in relation to the EU harmonization process, see Republic of Turkey Prime Ministry Secretariat General for EU Affairs. Available at <http://www.abgs.gov.tr>, accessed 9 December 2009.

²² Despite the fact that the AKP increased its vote share in the 2007 elections, the seats it won in the parliament slightly decreased compared with the 2002 elections because in 2007 four political parties passed the national electoral threshold (10 percent of the popular vote) necessary to get a seat; only AKP and CHP had done so in the 2002 elections.

parties competing for the same constituency.²³ The reason liberals voted for the AKP was the perception of the party as an agent of change for further democratization of the polity and accession to the EU. The AKP's economic and political performance in its first term in office was the primary basis of this perception.²⁴ However, despite this success at the polls in 2007, the AKP's performance in government began to deteriorate during its second term in office. In the period after the general election and up to the municipal elections in 2009, the AKP was perceived as being inconsistent in its economic management and in its political and social policy-making; this perception eventually would lose the party electoral support.

Economic Inconsistencies

Although the AKP had reaped the political benefits of the global economic expansion during its first term in office, after 2007 it failed to take the necessary steps to reduce the negative impact of the turning tide in the global economy. Specifically, between the general and municipal elections, Turkey started to feel the adverse effects of the growing global financial and economic crisis.²⁵ The party could not adjust to the new circumstances, and its economic policy-making remained paralyzed and ineffective in the early stages of the crisis. Thus, at a time that demanded the government's active involvement in economic policy-making, it left major decisions to the free market. For example, the government continuously postponed a stand-by agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) despite rising pressure from Turkish business circles. The party also resisted calls from the industrial sector which demanded reforms in the employment laws and regulations.²⁶ Erdogan followed an extremely liberal free-market approach, and his statements belittled the effects of the global crisis on the Turkish economy. For instance, he blamed the managers and owners of the companies in financial trouble for being incapable of running their businesses.²⁷ In a similar vein, Erdogan called those people with credit card debts dishonest.²⁸ Thus, he turned the crisis into a battle between the business world and economists on one hand, and the government on the other hand. Meanwhile, Turkish industrial production experienced a serious blow; exports declined, production decreased and unemployment increased.

²³ See further A. Carkoglu & M. Hinich (2008) The Changing Political Space of Turkey from 2001 to 2004, in: S. Yazıcı, K. Gozler & F. Keyman (eds) (2008) *Prof. Dr. Ergun Özbudun'a Armagan* [Essays in honor of Ergun Özbudun] (Ankara: Yetkin Yayınevi), pp. 109–136; and Carkoglu, Ideology or Economic Pragmatism? pp. 317–344.

²⁴ C. Camci (2009) AKP: An Egalitarian Opportunity or a Threat for Liberal Democracy in Turkey?, *ETHOS: Felsefe ve Toplumsal Bilimlerde Diyaloglar*, 2(4), pp. 1–24.

²⁵ See further Country Report for Turkey, *The Economist*, 3 December 2009.

²⁶ The Association of Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen (TUSIAD) has been vocal in criticizing the government's ineffectiveness in dealing with the economic crisis. For a sample of TUSIAD suggestions and criticisms, see Chairwoman Yalcindag's speech. Available at <http://www.tusiad.org.tr/FileArchive/2008.12.15-ADYKonusmaOECDToplantisi.pdf>, accessed 3 December 2009.

²⁷ Erdogan's speech in Bolu, March 2009. Available at <http://arsiv.sabah.com.tr/2009/03/23/haber,60121934ED644BD4A8041DE90565FE5C.html>, accessed 6 December 2009.

²⁸ Erdogan's speech in Eskişehir, March 2009. Available at <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/default.aspx?aType=So nDakika&ArticleID=1071020>, accessed 7 December 2009.

The effects of the crisis had become visible by 2008, when, after years of expansion, economic growth slowed down to 1.1 percent. In the last quarter of 2008, the Turkish economy shrank by 6.2 percent. Unemployment reached 11.5 percent in January 2008, and it continued to rise throughout the year, reaching 15.5 percent by January 2009. Unemployment was more severe in major urban centers than elsewhere, rising from 13.7 in January 2008 to 19 percent in January 2009. Industrial production dropped sharply in early 2009, just prior to the municipal elections in March. For example, the industrial production index, computed on a monthly basis, decreased by 21.3 percent in January, 23.7 percent in February, and 20.9 percent in March. In the same period, exports declined by 25.7 percent in January, 24.9 percent in February, another 28.4 percent in March 2009.²⁹ Erdogan's attitude toward the economic turbulence, the government's apparent inability to manage the crisis, and the continuing deterioration of economic indicators alienated many of the voters who had voted for the AKP in 2002 and 2007, when the party had been perceived as successful in managing economic policy.

This perception of ineffectiveness in economic governance has constituted a primary inconsistency for the AKP, which had based its *raison d'être* and performance criteria primarily on economic indicators. Considering the context that preceded the 2002 general elections, it was natural for the AKP to adopt economic growth along with democratization as its primary goal. The 2001 economic crisis in Turkey had hit the banking sector hard and had hurt the middle and lower classes.³⁰ The parties in coalition—the *Demokratik Sol Parti* (Democratic Leftist Party, or DSP), the *Anavatan Partisi* (Motherland Party, or ANAP) and the MHP—suffered a serious below in the 2002 elections as a result, and none won any seats in parliament, essentially leaving the political scene to the AKP and the CHP.³¹

Furthermore, the AKP's prime constituency is the devout bourgeoisie that has grown and expanded in the aftermath of the economic liberalization in the 1980s. The provincial entrepreneurs have turned into devout bourgeoisie during liberalization as they attained economic growth and experienced substantial change in their lifestyles. The devout bourgeoisie comprised a distinct status group, who also owned the means of production, by fusing religious piety with capitalist activity to build a new class identity around relations of production, consumption and religious devotion. The changes in economic class and social status led to changes in the political preferences of the devout bourgeoisie and creating an elective affinity between the new bourgeois class and pragmatic politics that the AKP advocated.³² Because the devout bourgeoisie had gained its identity primarily through economic activity and its successful blending of religion and capitalism³³ and because they desired to consolidate the free market economy, which fueled their support for the AKP, the party's perceived inability to manage the economic crisis became a serious handicap.

²⁹ Turkish Statistical Institute. Available at <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr>, accessed 2 December 2009.

³⁰ On the 2001 economic crisis, see further Z. Onis & B. Rubin (eds) (2003) *The Turkish Economy in Crisis* (London: Frank Cass). The volume also appeared as a special issue of *Turkish Studies*, 4(2).

³¹ For the impact of the 2002 elections on the Turkish political scene, see Ali Carkoglu (2002) Turkey's November 2002 Elections: A New Beginning? *MERIA*, 6(4).

³² S. Gumuscu, Class, Status, and Party.

³³ A. Insel (2003) The AKP and Normalizing Democracy in Turkey, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 102(2/3), pp. 297–301.

In addition to its inability to deal with the economic crisis, the AKP became the target of corruption accusations. In 2008, a court case in Germany revealed the close ties between a private voluntary association and top AKP-appointed bureaucrats. According to court documents, a Germany-registered non-governmental organization had raised funds ostensibly for humanitarian aid to Indonesian earthquake victims, but in actuality it instead transferred the funds to Turkey. The German court suspected that these funds were used to finance the AKP's political campaign.³⁴ Such corruption charges against high-ranking AKP members further marred the party's image, which was built on 'clean politics.' Indeed, the party's acronym, AK, suggests the Turkish adjective *ak*, which means white, and connotes the party's uncompromising attitude toward being clean and free of corruption. Thus, the issue of corruption constituted another area of inconsistency for the AKP.

Political Inconsistencies

A New Constitution

Since its establishment, the AKP set democratic consolidation in Turkey as a priority for itself. In its first term in office the party took important steps and implemented a series of reforms to make the polity more democratic. However, three main issues pertaining to democratic consolidation had been left untouched in its first term in office. These issues were Kurdish cultural and political rights, Alevi cultural and political rights, and preparation of a democratic constitution that guarantees freedoms and rights for all citizens including Kurds and Alevis. The AKP's second term in office has had a mixed record in these areas and includes many inconsistencies.

Right after the 2007 general elections, the AKP started its second term with an ambitious project to prepare a democratic and civilian constitution to replace the existing one written by the military junta in 1982. Given the mandate of the electorate, the party was expected to build a grand coalition to write a new social contract and instate a civilian and democratic constitution for the first time in republican history since 1924. The fundamental features of the new draft were oriented to curb the excess power of the president, to lift the headscarf ban in universities, and to redefine the concept of 'Turkishness' in terms of citizenship and loyalty to the constitution. The concept of Turkishness is significant for the consolidation of democracy in Turkey since its current and vague usage allows for infringements on freedom of expression. Article 301 of the criminal code is an important example that frequently permits such violations. For example, prior to 2008, Article 301 prescribed up to three years imprisonment for insulting Turkishness, a term with ethno-religious connotations. On April 29, 2008, the AKP-dominated parliament voted to change the Article after years of equivocation, and jail sentences for insulting the 'Turkish nation'—as opposed to Turkishness—now are limited to two instead of three years, leniency is proscribed for

³⁴ On the court case, see German prosecutors open new probe into Turkey-linked charity fraud, *Turkey Daily News* <online>. December 3, 2008. Available at <http://www.turkeydailynews.com/news/119/ARTICLE/1464/2008-12-03.html>, accessed December 4 2009.

first time offenders, and cases only can be opened with the permission of the Minister of Justice.³⁵

The process, however, unfolded in a way that caused hopes for a new democratic constitution to quickly disappear. The AKP brought together a group of academics, led by a renowned constitutional law professor, Ergun Ozbudun, to write a draft, but refused to open the process to other political actors, civil society organizations or ordinary citizens. The party maintained secrecy around the whole process of writing the draft, and this approach prompted different groups in society to severely criticize the secretive attitude and to claim that the product of such an undemocratic process could not be democratic. Since a new constitution signified a new social contract, its drafting could not be prepared by a single political party. The process, these groups argued, should include as wide participation as possible.

Although the AKP kept postponing the public discussion of the draft constitution, it was hacked and leaked to the press, igniting a series of new debates around the proposed changes.³⁶ While liberals supported the project of writing a civilian constitution,³⁷ secular groups focused on the implications of the draft constitution for the secular education system and the headscarf ban in the universities and heavily criticized the government for undermining the secular nature of the state.³⁸

Amid these debates, the AKP quickly changed course and left the draft constitution aside without making a formal statement as to the reasons. Instead, after the MHP signaled that they would support a legal arrangement to permit women to wear headscarves in public universities, the AKP proposed amendments to the existing constitution that would lift the ban on wearing headscarves.³⁹ This was a major inconsistency on the part of the governing party that had promised to consolidate liberal rights and freedoms in a civilian constitution, but instead gave up this project to solve the problem of a particular segment in the society. Such a dramatic turn raised concerns among liberals and confirmed the fears of the secular wing that the AKP indeed might be more sensitive to the expectations of conservative groups in the society than it is to the rights and freedoms of all citizens.

The Kurdish Issue

Similarly, the AKP in its party program promised to address the Kurdish issue in the most democratic way possible while acknowledging the multifaceted nature of the problem.⁴⁰

³⁵ Turkish and international human rights activists fear these changes still leave scope for unjust application of the law. Many of the best known Article 301 cases were on grounds of 'insulting Turkishness' in relation to the Armenian question. The accused included novelist and Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk and the Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink. See further on Article 301, N. Fisher Onar (2009) *Beyond Binaries: 'Europe,' Pluralism, and a Revisionist-Status Quo Key to Turkish Politics*, Sabanci University Essay Contest Finalist, pp. 15–19.

³⁶ For a detailed account of the crisis see E. Ozbudun & O. F. Genckaya (2009) *Democratization and Constitution Making in Turkey* (Budapest: Central European University Press), Chapter 6.

³⁷ S. Alpay (2007) What does the draft constitution signify? *Today's Zaman*, October 1, 2007.

³⁸ For a detailed account of the content of the draft constitution and methodological and substantive criticisms directed toward it see Z. Arslan (2007) Turkey's Bid for the New Constitution, *Insight Turkey*, July 2007.

³⁹ Secular groups severely criticized this abrupt turn by the AKP, claiming it proved they were correct with regard to the intentions of the party in drafting a new constitution. These constitutional amendments would form the basis of the court case against the AKP in the months to follow, as discussed below.

⁴⁰ AKP Party Program, pp. 28–30.

However, a quick overview of AKP policies on the issue shows mixed results. Overall, the AKP displays a tendency to develop solutions for the Kurdish question without any input from Kurds themselves. For example, the AKP government has shown sustained resistance to accommodating Kurdish actors. There seems to be no dialogue between the AKP and the DTP, the major Kurdish party in the country and in the Parliament. The same criticism also seems to be valid with regard to a dialogue with Kurdish civil society organizations, as they complain of not being invited to city councils (*Kent Konseyleri*) by AKP municipalities through which they can be integrated into local decision-making processes. Hakan Yavuz and Nihat Ozcan have summarized the AKP's main argument on the Kurdish problem as: 'The Kurdish problem is not about nationalism but rather forced secularism and Turkish nationalism of the type enforced by Kemalist ideology. If we stress common Islamic ties and brotherhood, we can enhance the country and also end the conflict.'⁴¹ They also argue that AKP has been rather unsuccessful in either developing or implementing a coherent policy to address the Kurdish problem, citing four reasons:

- (1) Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's definition of the Kurdish question is very different from that of the Kurdish actors, especially the PKK-led political parties;
- (2) there is a major conflict between the state institutions and the [AKP] over the conceptualization of the Kurdish issue and the foundations of the Turkish Republic;
- (3) one of the primary fears of the [AKP] is that the Kurdish issue could split the party and undermine its support in Turkish-Muslim provinces in central and eastern Anatolia; and
- (4) the Kurdish issue has the potential to lead to a major confrontation with the military.⁴²

However, as already been discussed, the project of writing a civilian and democratic constitution, which would promise a democratic solution to the Kurdish problem, has been shelved, while legal reforms still lack provisions on rights. To illustrate, as also stated in the European Commission's latest Progress Report on Turkey, the Anti-Terror Law is still applied to prosecute and convict those expressing non-violent opinions on the Kurdish issue.⁴³ Regarding the recognition of Kurdish cultural rights, the AKP government initiated 24-hour Kurdish language broadcasting in the state radio and television agency, TRT; however, Kurdish has yet to be introduced in either the public or private school systems, while Kurdish language schools are underdeveloped.

In 2008, the *Turkiye Ekonomik ve Sosyal Etudler Vakfi* (Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, or TESEV) published a report on the Kurdish question, which proposed steps to be followed toward resolving the issue. The headings of the report were diverse, including issues such as disarmament of the PKK, dialogue with Kurdish political parties and non-governmental organizations, a new constitution, legal reforms, GAP Action Plan, industrial and trade policies, tourism, border trade, agriculture and livestock, education, fight against poverty, children, women, seasonal labor, internal displacement,

⁴¹ H. Yavuz & N. A. Ozcan (2006) The Kurdish Question and Turkey's Justice and Development Party, *Middle East Policy*, 13(1), pp. 102–119.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁴³ The European Commission Turkey 2008 Progress Report, p. 16. Available at http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/press_corner/key-documents/reports_nov_2008/turkey_progress_report_en.pdf, accessed December 10 2009.

Table 2. Votes received by the AKP and the DTP in 2004, 2007 and 2009 elections

City	2009 Municipal ⁴⁵		2007 General		2004 Municipal	
	AKP	DTP	AKP	DTP ⁴⁶	AKP	DTP ⁴⁷
Diyarbakir	31.5	59.4	40.9	46.6	32.2	43.4
Van	34.3	48.3	53.2	32.1	40.3	26.3
Sirnak	30.8	60.6	26.9	51.2	24.9	38.0
Agri	28.9	37.2	63.1	22.1	34.6	19.3
Siirt	35.0	37.3	48.8	38.7	37.9	26.9
Hakkari	20.6	73.7	33.4	56.2	45.3	32.8
Turkey	38.8	5.7	46.6	5.2	41.7	5.2

village guards, return of Kurds who were subject to forced migration, urban life, Compensation Law, land mines, restoring justice, and strengthening local governments.⁴⁴

The reforms regarding the economic aspect of the Kurdish question, such as industrial and trade policies, and the GAP Action plan seem to be the ones upon which the AKP government has been most successful. However, two questions remain in terms of their validity regarding the Kurdish question. First, the economic policies are not policies directed specifically to the Kurdish population. They are policies directed at the society at large. Thus, looking at the performance of the AKP in the economic realm to assess the party's success at addressing the Kurdish issue is rather misleading. Second, to look at the Kurdish issue solely from an economic perspective is problematic. As the TESEV report also underlines, the issue has many aspects in different domains of life, i.e., sociocultural, political, educational, etc. Despite the fact that the AKP in its party program acknowledges these points, overall its report card has not been very promising on the Kurdish issue. As a result, the party lost the major Kurdish cities that formerly had AKP municipalities such as Van, Sirnak, and Siirt in the 2009 municipal elections. Table 2, below, summarizes the transfer of votes between the AKP and the DTP in the last three elections.

The Alevi Question

The Alevi Muslims represent a sizable sectarian minority in Turkey,⁴⁸ and this community has been concerned with the state's efforts to fuse Sunni Islam with Turkish national identity within the framework of a secular nation-state. The state, despite its secular claims, formalized and promoted a Sunni religious set of beliefs that it enforced on all

⁴⁴ TESEV (2008) *A Roadmap for a Solution to the Kurdish Question: Policy Proposals from the Region for the Government* (Istanbul: Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, TESEV Publications).

⁴⁵ The candidates are equally important in the municipal elections. However, we report only the vote shares that the parties got for the city assembly elections, not the vote shares that their candidates got.

⁴⁶ The DTP ran as independents in the 2007 general elections to bypass the 10 percent national threshold.

⁴⁷ The DTP made an alliance with the *Sosyal Demokrat Halkçı Parti* (SHP, Social Democratic People's Party) in the 2004 municipal elections.

⁴⁸ For accounts of the meaning of Alevism and Alevi religious practices, see G. Kocam & A. Oncu (2004) Citizen Alevi in Turkey: Beyond Confirmation and Denial, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 17(4), pp. 464–489; for an account of the political and cultural demands of Alevis, see E. Nesriyat (1999) *Tarihi ve Kültürel Boyutlarıyla Türkiye'de Bektaşiler, Aleviler, Nusayriler*, [Bektashis, Alevis, and Nusayris in Turkey with its Historical and Cultural Dimensions] (Istanbul: Ensar Nesriyat).

citizens, including Alevis, through the Directorate of Religious Affairs and a Directorate of Pious Foundations. The Alevi concerns further were exacerbated when the military regime in 1980 adopted a Turkish-Islamic Synthesis (a doctrine combining Turkish nationalism and Sunni Islam) and made religious education a requirement at elementary and secondary schools. In this context, the Directorate of Religious Affairs built several new mosques and appointed prayer leaders (imams) not only in Sunni towns and villages, but also in Alevi communities.⁴⁹ In reaction, some Alevis demanded representation within the Directorate of Religious Affairs,⁵⁰ while others rejected the idea of representation altogether.

The AKP in its second term in office communicated its desire to ‘solve’ the Alevi question. Accordingly, the government contacted Alevi groups in November 2007, listened to their demands and inserted a separate section on Alevism in the text books used for compulsory religion courses. However, Alevi demands go further. Alevis ask for removal of compulsory religion instruction from the national educational curriculum; turning the Madimak Hotel (where 37 Alevi intellectuals died in a fire started by Sunni protesters on July 2, 1993) into a ‘museum of shame’; abolition of the Directorate of Religious Affairs; and recognition of *Cem Evleri* (Alevi prayer houses) as places of worship.⁵¹ The AKP has not delivered on any of these demands and, as with the Kurdish question, it has followed a state-centered approach in dealing with the Alevi community. Indeed, since the party first approached the Alevi issue, it has sought to co-opt some of the Alevi groups at the expense of others instead of maintaining a dialogue with all Alevi organizations.⁵² The Cem Foundation was the primary actor involved in meetings with the government, while the AKP left the Alevi-Bektasi Federation, along with Alevis represented by the Federation, out of these deliberations. In response, the Bektasi Federation accused the government of trying to create a ‘state Alevism’ and of solving the Alevi problem without incorporating the Alevis. Similar to the way it dealt with the Kurdish issue, the AKP has been selective in its approach to the Alevi issue and preferred to communicate with the Alevi groups that could be incorporated within orthodox Islam rather than accommodating Alevis in their plurality. Thus the party, as it did with the Kurdish issue, sustained an imposing attitude rather than a pluralist one.

Social Inconsistencies

Despite the fact that the AKP embraces a pluralist and liberal approach to social policies in its program, the party’s leaders have shown that what the party understands of

⁴⁹ G. Kocam & A. Oncu, *Citizen Alevi in Turkey: Beyond Confirmation and Denial*, p. 477.

⁵⁰ For details see Cem Vakfi (2000) *Anadolu Inanc Onderleri Birinci Toplantisi*, 16–19 Ekim 1998, *Istanbul: Dedelerin, Babalarin, Ozanlarin Gorus ve Dusunceleri* [The First Meeting of Anatolian Wise Men, October 16-19, 1998, Istanbul] (Istanbul: Cem Vakfi).

⁵¹ For a document released by Alevis on their demands see (1989) *Alevilik Bildirgesi* [Alevi Manifesto]. Available at <http://www.alevi.dk>, accessed December 1 2009.

⁵² The estimated number of Alevis in Turkey ranges from five to 20 million depending on the source. Nevertheless, the majority of Alevis are represented by two major organizations: the Cem Foundation and the Alevi-Bektasi Federation. These two organizations are at odds in their perception of Alevism and the proper rights of Alevis. The Cem Foundation perceives Alevism as part of mainstream Islam whereas the Alevi-Bektasi Federation insists that Alevism connotes a social identity that goes beyond religion and cannot be assimilated in orthodox Islam.

pluralism is confined to political rights with limited acknowledgment of different social identities. Adopting a socially conservative outlook that often intersects with Islamism, the party shows little tolerance for different lifestyles and identities. The party officials often raise the issue of morality and loss of identity as the prevailing problem in society. This limited understanding of social pluralism has become more visible, particularly at the local level where party officials have attempted to make social life more conservative. Several AKP mayors, for example, have suggested moving restaurants that serve alcohol to the margins of their area of jurisdiction. Other AKP mayors have wanted to build gender-segregated parks.

The issue of alcohol consumption has been an important item on the agenda of the party. The restaurants and cafes managed by the municipalities do not serve alcoholic beverages. Meanwhile, the rental contracts of some restaurants that serve alcohol were cancelled by AKP municipalities.⁵³ Moreover, the AKP municipalities also used their authority in giving and renewing alcohol permits to reduce alcoholic consumption by refusing to renew the permits of some of the restaurants.⁵⁴ This discretion allowed the municipalities run by the AKP to start relocating such restaurants to the margins of their areas of jurisdiction. For instance, the AKP-run municipality of Denizli banned alcohol in the city and moved the alcohol-serving restaurants to the outskirts of the city.⁵⁵ There is anecdotal evidence that those bars that cannot renew their alcohol-serving permits turn themselves into membership club houses where only members are allowed to be served alcoholic beverages, thus, creating an emerging cleavage in Denizli's society.⁵⁶

One study also revealed that the AKP's social policy of conservatism has created a significant tide of conservative pressure on Alevis, unveiled women, university students and non-practicing Muslims in different parts of the country.⁵⁷ The interviewees for this study revealed that while the AKP claims to side with the individual in its party program, in practice the party only is willing to promote the rights of individuals against the state establishment. When it comes to the society, the AKP seems to leave the individual to the mercy of a community defined by a religious and traditional ethos.⁵⁸ This attitude brings the AKP closer to Islamism rather than democratic liberalism.

The study affirmed, moreover, the general anxiety in secular circles regarding the AKP's partisan approach to appointments of civil servants and bureaucrats. Partisan appointments are not new in Turkish politics, as all past governments have preferred appointing their supporters to bureaucratic posts instead of following a legal-rational mentality and promoting merit-based selections. What is different in the AKP's case is that the party's partisan appointments have clear ramifications for increasing conservatism in the society and resulting pressure on individuals who follow different lifestyles such as non-practising Muslims, secular men, Alevis, youth and unveiled women. These

⁵³ 'İstanbul'da İçki Yasakları Yayılıyor! [Alcohol Bans are expanding in Istanbul!], *Radikal Newspaper*, September 26, 2008.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ B. Toprak, et al. (2009) *Türkiye'de Farklı Olmak: Din ve Muhafazakarlık Ekseninde Otekileştirilenler* [Being different in Turkey: Becoming the Other on the basis of religion and conservatism] (Istanbul: Bogazici Üniversitesi), p. 81.

⁵⁶ *AKP'li başkana 4. MURAT tepkisi*, [Reaction to AKP mayor], *Aksam Newspaper*, October 11, 2005.

⁵⁷ Toprak, et al., *Türkiye'de Farklı Olmak*, pp. 112–120.

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 112–120.

appointments are most visible in institutions of education and health. The managers in many of these institutions are accused of discriminating against unveiled teachers, doctors and nurses. According to an interviewee, these pressures encourage many civil servants to change their attitudes and outlooks and conform to a conservative and pious image. For instance, many teachers and civil servants who do not fast during Ramadan have begun to pretend that they are fasting, even if they do not, to avoid such pressures.⁵⁹

The period that followed the 2007 elections has been a time when fears that the AKP harbors a hidden Islamist agenda have resurfaced. The party's initiatives after the 2007 elections played a critical role in the process. As mentioned above, amid the debates on the draft constitution, the AKP proposed a constitutional amendment aimed at lifting the ban on headscarves in the universities. This move sparked an intense debate about veiling, the role of religion in the public sphere and, most important of all, the AKP's 'hidden' agenda with regard to establishing an Islamic state.⁶⁰ These debates culminated in the state prosecutor submitting a case against the AKP to the Constitutional Court in March 2008.⁶¹ The prosecutor claimed that the AKP has been the base of anti-secular activities, as evidenced by Erdogan's speeches, the statements of AKP MPs and the actions of the municipalities. The Court decided to cut the state's financial support of the party rather than to close it.⁶² This court decision confirmed that the AKP is not an Islamist party like other MG parties, but it indicated that the AKP has yet to consolidate its conservative identity and clearly delineate its understanding of the role of Islam in public life. While the Court acknowledged the political legitimacy of the party by taking a decision *against* its closure, it also acknowledged the general discontent about the AKP's non-adjusted, conservative/pro-Islamist policies by cutting its state financial support. This court decision indicated that the AKP has yet to define and consolidate its conservative identity and show precisely how this identity remains aloof from Islamism.

Conclusion

While investigating the reasons for the decrease in the votes of the AKP from 46.6 percent in the July 2007 general elections to 39 percent in the March 2009 municipal elections, this article argued that the notable decrease in AKP votes in less than two years is a result of inconsistencies in the AKP's economic, political and social policy-making during its second term in office. By comparing the AKP's performance in its first and second terms, we see that the AKP was not as successful in its second term as it was in the first. The party simply could

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ E. Kalaycioglu (2005) The Mystery of the Turban: Participation or Revolt? *Turkish Studies*, 6(2), pp. 233–251; Turkey at Odds over Headscarf Ban, *TIME*, February 8, 2008; Turkey Divided on Headscarf Ban, BBC News, February 11, 2008; and S. Tavernis Turkey's High Court Overturns Headscarf Rule, *The New York Times*, June 6, 2008. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/06/world/europe/06turkey.html>, accessed December 1 2009.

⁶¹ See The Case against the AK Party, *The Economist*, June 12, 2008; G. Jenkins (2008) Turkey's Latest Crisis, *Survival*, 50(5), pp. 5–12; and Z. Onis (2009) Conservative Globalism at the Crossroads: The Justice and Development Party and the Thorny Path to Democratic Consolidation in Turkey, *Mediterranean Politics*, 14(1), pp. 21–40.

⁶² The state, according to the Turkish Political Party Law, is one of the main sources of financial support for political parties. The amount that the state would pay each party is calculated proportionately based on the percent of votes received by the party in the most recent general elections.

not manage the effects of the global economic crisis on Turkey and ignored the demands of both the business circles and the unions. Moreover, Erdogan's statements regarding the management of the crisis on the personal level alienated many voters in society.

The AKP's political policy-making also was full of inconsistencies. Despite the fact that the AKP program is based on consolidation of democracy and liberalism, and the fact that the AKP *did* pursue these ends in its first term, in its second term, the party failed to incorporate pluralism in its policy-making. It estranged the Kurdish and Alevi populations by favoring certain groups at the expense of others. This non-pluralist, non-embracing, yet imposing attitude contrasted with the party's rhetoric of liberal democracy while creating new cleavages within these communities.

The AKP's second term in office revealed that social pluralism is also not well digested by the party. The fact that different lifestyles are not welcome is well observed in the party's partisan appointments based on conservative lifestyles and piety. At the local level, the party encourages conservatism as seen in the example of Denizli or as is sensed by unveiled teachers and doctors and non-practising Muslim and Alevi civil servants.

While these inconsistencies are the reasons as to why the AKP suffered a loss in its electoral support in the recent municipal elections, they also indicate that the party has not yet completed its democratic transformation. Despite its rhetoric of liberal democracy and pluralism in its approach to the Kurdish and Alevi issues, in practice the AKP adopts an imposing attitude instead of a democratic and pluralist one. Particularly at the local level, the party remains resistant to pluralism and close to conservative communitarianism. These inconsistencies and oscillations indicate that the AKP has not yet completed its journey from Islamism to liberal democracy.

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