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Editors: Dr. Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak and Dr. Joel D. Parker

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The 2023 Elections: Legitimization of the New Türkiye

Dr. Christos Teazis

During the past decade, the term "New Türkiye" was introduced to the Turkish political discourse in order to distinguish Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's successive terms from his predecessors.¹ Given the radical changes that this concept envisions for the state's political organization – including the transition from a parliamentary democracy to a presidential one – there is no doubt that New Türkiye will have enormous impact on Türkiye's political institutions. Moreover, it seems that all these radical changes will soon be legitimized in a new constitution that will most likely enter into force after the upcoming Turkish elections in 2023. Therefore, to better grasp the conceptual basis for this new system, one should examine the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) self-image, rooted in the first Grand National² Assembly of 1920.³

At that time, the two ideologically opposed groups that dominated the assembly were known as the "first" and the "second" group. The first group contributed the ideological basis of the Republican People's Party (CHP) founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who was also the founder of the Turkish Republic in 1923. The outlook of the second group opposed the founding philosophy of the Turkish Republic in 1923.⁴ This opposing worldview traced back to the second group was revived thanks to the political success of Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP). When Erdoğan became prime minister in 2003, the ideological inheritors of the second group began to dominate the state. Through the AKP and its charismatic leader, the red lines of

New Türkiye were drawn. Nonetheless, the old lines of the *ancien régime* did not fade away. Therefore, the difference between the two periods should be examined.

The Notion of Secularism

The first red line is the so-called principle of secularism, as defined by the Republican People's Party, which finds its ideological origin in the French model of *laïcité*. The Turkish version of secularism is reflected in the statement: "In your private life you will freely experience the Islamic religion as you wish, but in the public sphere you will behave according to the principles of state."⁵ Perhaps the most significant indicator of this world-view was the conversion of Hagia Sophia mosque into a museum in 1934, which symbolized the power of Atatürk's government as well as the application of *laïcité* in public life. By contrast, the conversion of the Hagia Sophia Museum into a mosque again, on July 24, 2020, symbolized Islam's return to the public sphere.

With AKP's rise to power the application of secularism went through a serious transformation. Instead of the strict *laïcité*, the American model of moderate secularism was adopted. Religion, which was previously limited to the private sphere, expanded to the public sphere, and interacted with a type of liberal-capitalist value system. The AKP worked to turn Islam into a progressive vehicle, re-designed to fit the framework akin to Weber's 'Protestant work ethic'.⁶

The Islamic movement adopted the essence of capitalism including the value of private capital accumulation and began to disseminate it to society. The AKP worked to integrate Türkiye's socioeconomic structure into the capitalist system, albeit under the guise of Islam. As noted by the Şennur Özdemir, this process contributed to the broadening and deepening of capitalism in Türkiye.⁷

The Transformation of the Political System

Following secularism, the second red line of the *ancien régime* was associated with the structure of the political system. It has also gone through drastic changes. For example, the October 21, 2007, referendum allowed the Turkish people to directly elect their president, and the April 16,

2017, referendum transformed the political system from parliamentary democracy into a Turkish type of presidential system where the president's executive powers are strengthened at the expense of the parliament without any serious checks and balances. Despite these concrete changes, I argue that the system that is now in effect is not a proper presidential system, but rather could be termed a "semi-parliamentary-presidential system". Moreover, we can see the creeping tendency towards the American model that favors two large parties at the expense of other small political parties. The political alliance that Erdoğan leads has begun to call itself the People's (*Cumhur*) alliance, whereas the one led by the CHP among other opposition parties has begun to call itself the Nation (*Millet*) alliance. The main characteristic of this burgeoning two-party system is that the outlook of both sides will be based on the founding philosophy of the AKP of Erdoğan - which gradually became the "new normal" in Erdoğan's new Türkiye. In other words, despite the existence of the opposition bloc the new circumstances have turned the AKP-MHP alliance into a "state party" as this bloc dictates the state ideology, similar to the CHP of 1920s.

The State Party and the Continuity of the State

In the 20's and 30's the CHP was a state party, and it was the party that shaped the red lines of the Turkish republic of 1923. Having drawn the new red lines of the republic through constitutional amendments and referendums, the AKP has taken over this position of the CHP as a state party. Today any criticism against the government is considered as treason against the state by the AKP-MHP circles. The formation of the new red lines does not mean the creation of a new state at the expense of the previous one. On the contrary, the same state that was founded with the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 will be the foundation of the new Türkiye in 2023. In other words, the methods that the state used for founding the original "new Türkiye" in 1923, will be used to form the "new Turkey" in 2023 as well. Here are some concrete examples:

Both Atatürk and Erdoğan, as founding leaders of their own new Türkiyes, can be considered as populist leaders in favor of a republican government. Atatürk founded the *Republican People's Party* (CHP) and Erdoğan currently leads the People's alliance (*Cumhur*), which in the Turkish political literature, can also be defined as Republican. The CHP adopted six arrows (Republicanism, Populism, Nationalism, Laïcism, Etatism and Revolution) into its program in

1931. By adding republicanism to the constitution in 1937, it became foundational to the state. A similar phenomenon can be seen with Erdoğan's "Rabia" conception. Though it did not result in any radical changes in the Turkish society as the way six arrows caused, it seems that Erdoğan regarded CHP's modus operandi as a useful method to mobilize the masses. Thus, by intertwining the ideals "one nation", "one flag", "one homeland" and "one state" into the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood sign, the Turkish president successfully modified it for his own usage and turned these slogans into his party's guiding principles in 2017. Therefore, in the way that the six arrows concept was included in the previous Turkish constitutions most likely in the aftermath of the 2023 elections the Rabia will be included in the new constitution.⁸

When Turkey transformed from a single-party rule into a multi-party democracy During the 1946-1960 period, then the opposition Democrat (*Demokrat*) party was led by Adnan Menderes. This party should not be seen against to the founding philosophy of the Turkish Republic of 1923. This is because Menderes was originally a member of the CHP. In other words, the main opposition party emerged from within the CHP's founding philosophy. There is a good chance this will happen to the AKP. When the five opposition parties - out of six - that make up the Nation alliance are examined, we can see that despite their criticism of Erdoğan for his economic policy, they do not challenge the founding philosophy of the AKP. On the contrary, they support it in their actions.

The same phenomenon can be seen also with respect to today's CHP. For instance, the leader of the party, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, recently called for headscarf freedom reform in the name of religious freedom.⁹ President Erdoğan took CHP's proposal to one step further and responded by calling for a more comprehensive reform by making constitutional changes via a referendum.¹⁰ Kılıçdaroğlu's proposal can be seen as a clear indication of his party's adoption of the AKP's founding philosophy. The six opposition parties (CHP, Good Party (İyi Parti), Democracy and Progress Party, Future Party, Felicity Party, and the Democrat Party) signed a manifesto calling for a strengthened parliamentary system, as an alternative to the system of government that grants the president more power. The second important aspect of the manifesto¹¹ was its focus on the principle of religious freedom in the social, political, and public spheres.¹² In other words the headscarf will most likely will be used to demonstrate the domination of moderate secularism instead of the strict *laïcité*.

Conclusion

The elections of 2023 will not be an ordinary election between the AKP and the other parties, but rather it will be about the legitimization and the recognition of the AKP as the dominant party of the state. This entails that the parliament will become a constituent assembly, and that the above-mentioned redlines (for now the soul of the old Türkiye) will be changed, in favor of the *Rabia* concept and religious freedom - which most likely will become the backbone of the new constitution. The legal principles that will be built upon this worldview will shape Türkiye's political institutions and legislation for the coming decades.

Dr. Christos Teazis is an associate professor at Ankara University (Political Sciences department). Teazis received his PhD in political sciences from Ankara University. He was a LIBRA professor at University of Maine at Farmington (2018). His areas of focus are: Islamic movements in Türkiye, state ideology in Türkiye, social movement in Türkiye, political parties, and comparative politics between Greece-Türkiye from socio-political and socio-economical points of view.

Notes

¹ Hay Eytan Cohen Yanaracak, "Welcome to the "New Turkey"", *Beehive*, September 30, 2014, <https://dayan.org/content/welcome-new-turkey> [December 9, 2022].

² The name of the Grand National Assembly (Büyük Millet Meclisi), included the word ‘millet’ whose standard translation into English in this context is ‘national’. However, its original meaning in Islam was religious.

³ Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 38–39.

⁴ Christos Teazis, *İkincilerin Cumhuriyeti* (Istanbul: Mızrak Yayınevi 2010), p. 35-41.

⁵ Niyazi Berkes, *Türkiyede Çağdaşlaşma* (Ankara: YKY 2002), p. 536.

⁶ Emin Baki Adas, "The making of entrepreneurial Islam and the Islamic spirit of capitalism," *Journal for Cultural Research* 10, no. 02 (2006): 113-137.

⁷ Şennur Özdemir, *MÜSİAD: Anadolu sermayesinin dönüşümü ve Türk modernleşmesinin derinleşmesi* (Ankara, Vadi yayınları, 2006).

⁸ Christos Teazis, *16 Nisan Referendum: Yeni Kırmızı Çizgiler* (Ankara, Nisan-Mayis-Haziran, 2017), p. 34.

⁹ "Kılıçdaroğlu'nun başörtüsü çıkışı: Ne dedi, siyasiler ne tepki verdi?", *BBC Türkçe*, October 4, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cjrn4y9qdwjo> [December 8, 2022].

¹⁰ "Erdoğan, başörtüsü için referandum çağrısında bulundu", *BBC Türkçe*, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/ck7ezrpd4j8o> [December 8, 2022].

¹¹ In the manifesto, they argued that the Turkish republic was founded partially based on the Constitution of 1921. It means the effectual rejection of the constitution of 1924, a constitution seen as the spirit of the Turkish Republic of 1923. The CHP signed this manifesto, which means that it had given up its political mission as a state party.

¹² "Güçlendirilmiş Parlamenter Sistem mutatabak metni", [February 28, 2022], p. 14 and p.31, <https://im.haberturk.com/images/others/2022/03/02/A4.pdf> [November 28, 2022].