

AKP as Political and Social Center

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Abstract: This study examines the structure of Turkish party system based on center-periphery and state-religion cleavage analytical categories and it tries to describe how it has changed along Justice and Development Party's ten years government. The paper argues that, despite its avowedly Islamic background, Justice and Development Party has proved to adapt and transform itself and Turkish system by presenting itself to the public as a successful center-right party, which supports democracy, secularism, human rights and economic development. Based on Rokkan's state-religion model it concludes that under AKP Turkish political and social center, once strongly divided on, may finally overlap. Although there are still some challenges in front to deal with, the ongoing dynamics lead by AKP have to be considered as a crucial transformation since they sign the new direction of Turkish politics.

Keywords: party systems, center-periphery, political transformation, Turkish Politics, Justice and Development Party (AKP)

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Introduction

The analysis of parties and party systems is a key area in the study of political science since it is challenging to define a democratic regime apart from the exam of its electoral competition. In the field of politics, where the changes are quite frequent, party systems continue to evolve, providing alternatives to the voters, therefore they deserve an appropriate attention and theorization. Along the story the emphasis on the role of political parties and on the structure of their reference systems has been greatly encouraged by ongoing democratization processes. According to this, nowadays some party systems show consolidated models while others are not stable structures yet. However, the growing importance of their unities and the diversity of their environments make impossible a comprehensive review of what has been published, providing that the initial studies proposed by Maurice Duverger and Giovanni Sartori between the 50s and 70s are irreplaceable milestone.²

In general, we can identify different degrees of relation between party and society and if at one extreme lies a weak link between voter and party on the other hand there are those citizens who fully identify themselves with the party. All these approaches affect the competition between parties therefore along a weak link it is much easier that new units might find space to emerge and compete with the already existing ones inside the political arena. On the contrary, in front of a deep interconnection with society parties tend to concentrate the greater degree of support, which does not necessarily produce a stable system. Indeed, the stability depends on the combination of the ideologies characterizing the electoral competition (Merkel, 2005).

While on one hand, the party organization has a scientifically and high quality literature, on the other the systemic study has received less attention. After Stein Rokkan's contribution, which has maintained its value over time, no valuable theoretical approach aiming to understand parties' behavior and the effects of their interaction was registered. In Rokkan's theory the main task is to describe and to explain the standing differences in the structure of

² Here it is referred to the classical studies: Maurice Duverger, *I partiti politici*, 1951 and Giovanni Sartori, *Partiti e Sistemi di Partito*, Editrice Univeristaria Firenze, 1971.

European political systems with particular emphasis on those social characteristics that generate different types of cleavages in relation to specific events and special development processes (Rokkan, 2002.).

In democracy, voters are asked to express their choices on specific issues so parties, playing the main role as social agencies and setting the limits for the competition, facilitate the creation of national political systems. The social transformations, resulting in several cleavages, are reflected by party differences and voting behavior. These are feasible in revolutionary dynamics as outcome of the conflict between the center and the periphery of the system; in the activity of ethnic, linguistic or religious groups or in the historical tension between the state, which tries to dominate the entire public space, and the church/religion, concerned to maintain its historical privileges and defend its values. Furthermore, the economic revolution gives rise to class conflicts: the struggle between landowners and the emerging middle class, which in its advanced stage is revealed in the clash between the capitalists and the working class (Rokkan, 2002).

Shortly, these four types of cleavages still continue to operate, with the necessary adjustments, in the contemporary world providing a framework for the analysis of party systems. According to the fact the democratic liberalism has to deal with these divisions, in particular when different identities are exasperated and the protection of certain freedom of religion or culture is sought, to understand how democracy manages these cleavages requires first of all an analytical effort of their dynamics and interactions within a specific context.

In general terms, according to Rokkan the opposition between the center and the periphery, between the economic and cultural interests, and the tension between the *élites* is the starting point of all cleavages. However, during the third wave of democratization those resulting from industrial society are the most important sources of any political division and party support (Lipset, 2001). Obviously, since different social alignments emerge from historical processes and economic developments, the party expressions related to the above mentioned models of cleavage change depending on the context. In this light, party models have change along the historical events and nowadays in the West postindustrial dynamics play a key role in the formation of new parties or in the rearrangement of their social support, whereas the traditional cleavages remain in all environments in transition (Lipset, 2001).

The theoretical basis of this approach, thus, focusing on the social structure and voting behavior, defines the existing cleavages inside the system as that particular social *stratum* that is constantly aligned with a particular party alternative (Kriesi, 1997).

It follows that Rokkan's contribution is an important point of reference for party competition analysis. However, the validity of his argument depends on the ability to determine whether a given cleavage exists and whether the contemporary mass politics are the result of these traditional dividing lines. The structure and institutionalization of a party system, indeed, depends on a combination of different social cleavages, which are going to crystallize some form of stability until new electoral mobilization intervenes. Therefore what characterizes a party system are several factors including not only the number of competing parties, their electoral weight and their ideological distance, but also the large number of arenas where the interactions are constituted (Mair, 2001).

Observing Turkish politics according to these analytical categories based on the center-periphery and state-religion cleavage is a due step to capture the peculiarities of the current ruling party and the transformation of the system under its government. Indeed, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) despite its avowedly Islamic background has proved to adept and transform itself and the system by presenting to the public as a successful center-right party, which supports democracy, secularism, human rights and economic development.

Turkish Party System

In the Turkish case political parties have traditionally been classified as left, right, center-left and center-right depending on their position within the political *spectrum* in reference to the center. The cleavage between center and periphery has been dominant for long time: the center was often seen in relation to the state reflected in the role of republican *élite* and bureaucracy while the periphery matched the middle class often supporting right-wing or center-right organizations. Therefore, center parties express people opinion by formulating policies aimed to meet their expectations and needs. Turkish political system, thus, is dominated by two centers. The first one is the political center, based on official state ideology respected by all political parties trying to access and maximize the power, while the other one is the social center that reflects the expectations and values of Turkish society (Mardin, 1998).

However, in order to properly analyze the peculiarities of contemporary Turkish system it is due to highlight the characteristics of its political and social structure. Along the foundation of Turkish Republic (1923) the main aim was to secularize and modernize the country along Western model, considered as useful process to remove the main causes of previous regime's decline (Rustow,2009). The emphasis on changing institutions and structures of Islam, perceived as the main obstacles to the modernizing efforts, are closely related to the peculiarity of Turkish revolution aiming to eliminate first of all the theological justification from the state. It follows that in the creation of the Turkish Republic as a modern state the secularization process has played a key role helping to establish a new national identity. In this context the way to manage the reforms was marked by certain elitism. Indeed, the masses were lead towards the contemporary level of civilization, free from any interference mystical-religious, by implementing policies from above under the leadership of some enlightened groups. The role of state officers, bureaucrats and military, mainly supported by the Republican Party, was part of this effort to empower people to the values of new state ideology that has been the main strategic aspect the modern state-building process (Kazancigil, 2009). The attempt to extremely differentiate public affairs and religion is the peculiar aspect of the Turkish republican experience. The *élite's* approach to the modernization was perceived as a departure from the past and it resulted in a deep mistrust towards all those aspects associated to the old way of life and in deep suspects towards religion and its institutions (Yilmaz, 2005). In fact, given the circumstances the new concept of nation-building could only be initiated in absence of any alternative state legitimacy sources thus banning Islam from the public sphere appeared as the natural corollary of Kemalism (Kramer, 2000).

Under these conditions the gap between the secular politics and the values of those religious people increasingly marginalized by the system expanded over time. The bifurcation between *élite* and masses, preventing trigger reform from below, culminated in an economic and social polarization between secularists and devout Muslims and rural classes and urban areas, which eventually led to mutual competition and strengthening (Kasaba, 1997). Modern Turkey, therefore, cannot be seen as the result of an autonomous and spontaneous process of modernization, but as the result of the Kemalist strategy attempting to control, limit and build a political order based on modernity and democracy. In this framework, the representation of the differences and different interests has often taken a negative connotation, and the political class

has always served the state in its need to limit-and not to represent- the different requests and social dynamics (Yavuz, 2009).

Indeed, the peculiarity of transition and political life in Turkey can be grasped only in relation to the nature of the Kemalist regime, also helpful to understand all the current dynamics. In the interpretation of Kemalism an important role is played by the Republican Party based on party *élite* organizational model. This lack of interest towards the masses has led to the definition of “exclusive one- party system” that reflects the social bifurcation and it is characterized by the fact that in one side it mobilizes the support of its constituent parts while in the other it narrows the space of political activity(Huntington, 1970). In other words, along the story of modern Turkey the political participation has been effectively limited to the western- oriented urban class while the traditional masses were excluded from the political game. In this context, the secular culture proposed by the new political architects was mainly confined to the big cities while the majority of population following the Islamic and traditional values was not affected (Zürcher, 1993).

However, all following political developments, which have witnessed a rapid transformation of Turkey, were the result of center-periphery dichotomy. The growing economic importance of the periphery was eventually followed by a broader political and social discovery involving every aspect of people's daily lives, especially in managing democratic reforms. This has helped to transform the historical political center into a social force oriented towards the liberalization and democratization (Yilmaz, 2005).

These concepts are more understandable by stating that along the change of both domestic and international political environment and the emergence of new opportunities the peripheral groups began to refer to Islam to redefine their world. The religion has begun to take on a particular attention the management of everyday life, acquiring a pervasive power in its modern development. The reemergence of Islam, however, was not only a reaction to a given situation, but it became a new paradigm in the formation of the counter-*élite*. Without any doubt this development should be read under the light of a profound criticism towards past revolutionary programs which has gradually extended its influence and its power in the periphery (Göle, 1997). Over time, the political center has undergone a redesign and especially after the 28 February 1997 trial the political arena started to match the social center by not claiming a precise

ideological placement but by protecting moral and traditional values and contributing to the de-ideologization process of Turkish politics (Sayari and Yilmaz, 2002).

These developments have contributed to conservative democratic AKP's success whose program is built on the concept of "conservatism" and "democracy. Nowadays, AKP can be considered in terms of both political and social center since its political understanding is designed to give voice to the interests and expectations of the periphery by implementing policies aiming to overcome the *status quo* (Çarkoğlu, 2002).

AKP as Social and Political Center

In the political history of Turkey, AKP with its Islamic background proves to be a very successful party. In its 10 year government it has attracted a large social consensus, which has resulted in the immense victory of 2011 general elections, marking the success of its leadership and challenging the systemic hitherto constraints before considered untouchable. AKP presents itself as an in evolution organization, which reacts both to external and internal changes and to some extent has created a new course in Turkey's political management.

The period of conservative democratic government can be divided into three phases: the first one starts with the rise in the public arena on November 3, 2002 when all efforts are focused to the "internationalization" of power. It is marked by a kind of familiar socket with the state structures and bureaucracy. With the second electoral success in 2007 the actual power is clearly defined and a greater autonomy is manifested in the control of systemic resources, as a result of the strategic opportunities arising from an extremely charismatic leadership. Moreover, the third period signs the consolidation of Erdoğan's government along a dominant position within Turkish political system.

Since its foundation in August 2001, AKP has declared its attachment to the idea of transformation and reform that has differentiated it from the rest of the other political parties already existing in the political *spectrum*. This objective of renewal has to be read in kind of continuity with the previous aspirations of Islamic parties in an attempt to remedy the undemocratic nature of Turkish political system. AKP, in other words, is presented to the public with the declared intention to initiate a profound transformation both of itself and Turkey by removing all constraints slowing down the democratization process in the Country. And it is this

new conception of politics, based on the importance given to foreign policy as *viaticum* to avoid a break with the Kemalist establishment, which has strengthened the party's image in the eyes not only of Turkish electorate, but also of economic *élite* and media. The new political style, giving priority to the reforms proposed by the International Monetary Fund and by Copenhagen criteria, has taken necessary steps for the consolidation of democracy and for gaining legitimacy in front of the international community (Duran, 2008). In this light it is announced the foundation of a non-Islamist “conservative democratic” party, marking the beginning of a new Islam “which is not in conflict, but it can be reconciled with the new world order” (Bulaç,2003).

As it has been manifested since the first election in 2002, by emphasizing the importance of conceptual categories not alien to the conservative tradition in Turkey AKP is constituted as a party that aspires to place at the center of the political *spectrum*. The first feature summarizing the new trend is based on party's self-definition in terms of “democratic,” “conservative,” “reformist” and “modern,” which reflects most of the differences within Turkish society in terms of added value and not as a source of conflict. “Making Turkey as international trade actor through free market policies” to be built on privatization policies and on the creation of incentives for foreign investment reflects the need to transform the state into an organization at the service of people. Since all the tensions within Islam and the fight against the establishment have gradually produced a significant human capital from AKP benefited for its political standing, this new party has to be considered as a crucial point in the political history of Turkey. Indeed, comparing to the leadership of the previous center-right parties, the new conservative democrats, in majority coming from the suburbs, look much more convincing in their populist demands for representing the masses (Taşkın, 2008).

The advantage of AKP, therefore, comes not only from its ability to benefit from a new group of intellectuals, but also from their ideological affinity about party's political program is based on a combination of moderate political reformism, cultural conservatism and economic neoliberalism. Thus, November 3, 2002 elections represented a real turning point in the recent political history of Turkey not only because a party with Islamic roots has obtained the government with 34.28 percent of the vote and about two thirds of the seats in Parliament, but also because for the first time a one-party government leads the country.

Although the question whether the center-periphery cleavage is still dominant in Turkish politics, along the growth of the middle class and intellectuals Islamists the center is no longer

united and cohesive as before and it lacks of compact *élite* that represents its interests. During AKP t first term government the configuration of Turkish political system has reflected many of the characteristics of such cleavage. The main opposition party (CHP), in fact, is the most strenuous defender of the center political values while AKP leadership represents the peripheral forces that over time have gained a sense of exclusion and discrimination against the secular center. This division between center and periphery and between secular and religious values has created a real dichotomy in current Turkish politics posing particular challenges to the democratic stability. However, since the very beginning AKP's main strength has been its ideological moderation that helped to attract many center-right votes and at the same time to mobilize a large support based on religious lines, and other variables. In this sense, the popularity of Prime Minister Erdoğan, able to establish a strong sense of identity with the common people coming especially from poor urban areas and villages of Anatolia was an added value in pushing the party to the current dominant position within the system.

Despite this, 2007 elections took place in an atmosphere of extreme polarization based on the main question concerning the nature of Turkish political regime pointing out that the challenge between the secularists and Islamists reflects a new version of the gap between center and periphery. This was an anticipated electoral call because after the government has encountered serious problems to elect the President of the Republic, the long debates on the candidates, the procedures and the possible implications on the political regime AKP was forced to hold elections about three and a half months before the due date. In this context, the second national victory by Erdoğan's party is particularly significant because the success is based on evaluation of its performance rather than on ideological cleavages, proving the prime minister's ability to transform a marginal ideological movement in a center party (Çarkoğlu, 2007). In the electoral race, AKP has secured 46.6% of the votes and a total of 550 Parliamentary seats. This is perceived as result of economic and European policies, which led to cement liberal fringes with conservatives (Çarkoğlu, 2008).

Furthermore, it seems that the party's transformation towards a decidedly pro-European program has made AKP the only engine of European reformation process in Turkey. Along the international and global dynamics, Turkish state has shown a legitimacy problem in maintaining its position as leading political reference, while civil society and cultural values have become the new reference point of the political discourse in Turkey (Keyman and Icduyugu, 2003).

Nevertheless, the secularists have proven to be an inefficient opposition. Turkey, in fact, has been witnessing a clash and a rebalancing of two cultures: one based on fear of national disintegration and on the loss of sovereignty, the other characterized by a certain familiarity with the logic of the globalized world. Paradoxically this is the result of the ongoing identity transformation in the ruling party as part of the continuous adaptation process by the new Islamic logic based on a broad political participation at both domestic and global level (Kosebalaban2005).

From 2007 to the new greatest electoral confirmation in 2011, AKP has consolidated its dominant position into Turkish political *spectrum*. June 12, 2011 is remembered as a historic day in Turkey since Recep Tayipp Erdoğan reconfirms his government leadership government supported by 50% of popular consensus. However, nowadays certain measures taken by the government increase the perception of AKP dominium on the political scene based on certain “civil authoritarianism”. In other words, along the third AKP term Turkey has passed the stage of confrontation with state and it seems that while state apparatus loses its prestige the government strengthens its own program (Çağaptay, 2009).

In front of such a polarization arises the question whether under the AKP Turkey is becoming a full democracy. Despite the last successes, since 2005 the democratic zeal has dramatically dropped producing strong criticism especially in the liberal sections. A reason can be traced back to the changing attitude occurred in the last two terms. Indeed, at the beginning the UE accession process democratic reforms were represented as an emergency but the European double standard approach towards Turkey and the repeated refusals of Turkish accession by France and Germany have contributed to spreading a more nationalist sentiment within the Turkish society. Furthermore, although the AKP has undertaken the important task of post-1980 regime institutional change, the development of internal politics shows that the stability of the political system is still uncertain. At formal level the substantial reforms do not address the major nodes of the Electoral Law contributing to increasing the power of this government (Çağaptay and Özçelik, 2010).

It follows that electoral success has opened the gate to political patronage, traditionally important element in obtaining votes in the Turkish scenario. However, what differentiates the current party system from the past model is primarily the decreasing number of parties inside the Parliament and the transition from a coalition government to a single party majority. Nevertheless comparing to the past the high degree of polarization in the interaction between the parties

remained unchanged. The division between secular forces and conservative, in fact, has continued to influence relations between AKP and the main opposition party. Future developments within Turkish party system therefore depend mainly on how AKP intends to maintain its dominant position along its electoral and parliamentary politics. The continuing growth of its popular support leads to question whether the current government represents the new center of the Turkish party system or if it simply moved towards a dominant position. Due to the diffusion of the substrate and the strength of the issues that have dominated Erdoğan's agenda, it is undoubtedly clear that AKP belongs to the center right wing of the conventional left-right spectrum and has a dominant position in the system. However, AKP endurance in the center will depend on how it will be able to manage the continuing tensions within the national arena.

Conclusion

The advantage of Erdoğan's leadership in occupying the center of Turkish party system is due to the combination of conservative values and democratic agenda within a program that by outlining the policy as a service to all people is the real force of this "catch-all" organization. Therefore AKP has two main features distinguishing it from other parties in Turkey. The first is that it is not ideologically driven, but it presents itself as a social service party, the second one refers to its liberal economic vision in favor of free market. The new course of Turkish politics, in other words, is based on the choice between the old and new interpretation of modernization that, while supporting the social dynamism, economic development and further modernizing impulses, aims to change the structure of the State based on "top down" logic and to redistribute political power among the people. In pursuing its political objectives AKP initially supported a patience based strategy, being careful to not be in open opposition with the secular establishment and to not depart away from the expectations of their constituents. Today, however, is in the delicate position of finding the balance between the various systemic dimensions without losing its supremacy in the political system. Indeed, after 2007 crisis the leadership has been more determined to proceed with a number of reforms in a transition time from "bureaucratic to the democratic republic" where the Constitution of 1980 is considered a major obstacle in democratizing the Country. From the systemic point of view, under AKP the political and social center, once strongly divided on Rokkan's state-religion based model, may finally overlap.

Although there are still some challenges in front to deal with, the ongoing dynamics lead by AKP have to be considered as a crucial transformation since they sign the new direction of Turkish politics.

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