

POLITICAL PARTIES APPROACHING THE PROBLEM OF “CHILDREN AND VIOLENCE”: THE EXAMPLES OF THE JDP AND THE RPP

SİYASİ PARTİLERİN “ÇOCUKLAR VE ŞİDDET” PROBLEMİNE YAKLAŞIMI: AKP VE CHP ÖRNEKLERİ

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Abstract: Although political parties in Turkey have been compared, through their election bulletins and/or party programs, on several aspects, there is no comparative work on the parties' approach towards children's rights. This article evaluates how the ruling party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party, JDP) and the main opposition party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, Republican People's Party, RPP) in Turkey approach children's rights and especially the problem of “children and violence”. The research is based on three pillars: a comparison of the party programs, a comparison of bulletins from the last national election and a news search within *Cumhuriyet* (The Republic) focusing on the last year (September 2012–August 2013). Analysis of *Cumhuriyet*, a national daily known for its emphasis on human rights issues, intends to reveal which children are neglected, as well as other issues related to violence and abuse that politicians underline in their declarations, and how those declarations may relate to official promises made in party discourse. Roughly speaking, this research shows that the two parties make similar promises to prevent child labor, fight juvenile crime and alleviate the plight of street children. The politicians make declarations on young PKK members and raped children. The subject of “children and violence” is just another subject where the ideological differences between the two parties can be seen. For instance, the social-democratic RPP promises to work for the prevention of child marriage and for the coverage of rural labor among 16–18 year olds under social security. The conservative-democratic JDP has not made similar promises. Through the news search, this research also shows that election bulletins may specifically cover the situation of youth involved in terror and that of children subject to physical abuse. The primary result surely is the urgent need for a bipartisan effort to resolve the problem of “children and violence”.

Key words: Children, Turkey, JDP, RPP, Cumhuriyet, party programs, election bulletins

Özet: Türkiye'deki siyasi partiler seçim beyannameleri ve/veya parti programları üzerinden çeşitli yönleriyle karşılaştırılmış olmalarına rağmen, siyasi partilerin çocuk haklarına yaklaşımlarına dair bir karşılaştırma çalışması yoktur. Bu makale iktidar partisi (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) ile ana muhalefet partisinin (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) Türkiye'deki çocuk haklarına ve özellikle “çocuklar ve şiddet” problemine yaklaşımlarını incelemektedir. Araştırma üç ana sütun üzerine temellendirilmiştir. Bunlar, parti programlarının karşılaştırılması, son genel seçim beyannamelerinin karşılaştırılması ve *Cumhuriyet Gazetesi* üzerinden (Eylül 2012 - Ağustos 2013) geçen seneye dair haber taramasıdır. İnsan hakları konusuna özel ilgi gösteren *Cumhuriyet Gazetesi*'nin analizi, siyasetçilerin açıklamalarında hangi çocukları ihmal ediyor gördüğü, şiddet ve suistimale ilintili buldukları konuları ve bu açıklamaların parti söylemlerindeki sözlerle ne kadar örtüştüğünü ortaya çıkarmayı hedeflemektedir. Genel olarak, bu araştırma her iki partinin de çocuk işçiliğini önlemek, çocuk suçluluğuyla savaşmak ve sokak çocuklarının durumlarını iyileştirmek konularında benzeri sözler verdiğini göstermektedir. Siyasetçiler genç PKK üyeleri ve tecavüz edilen çocuklar hakkında açıklamalarda bulunmuştur. “Çocuklar ve şiddet” konusu iki partinin arasındaki ideolojik farklılıkların görüldüğü alanlardan yalnızca bir tanesidir. Örneğin, sosyal-demokrat CHP, çocuk evliliklerinin önlenmesi ve 16-18 yaşları arasındaki tarım işçilerinin sosyal güvenlik sistemine dahil edilmesi konularında çalışma

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sözü vermektedir. Muhafazakar-demokrat AKP'nin benzeri sözleri yoktur. Haber taraması kanalıyla ise araştırma, seçim beyannamelerinin teröre karışan çocukların durumu ile fiziksel suistimale maruz kalan çocukların durumunu içerebileceğini göstermiştir. Ana sonuç ise kuşkusuz, “çocuklar ve şiddet” problemini çözmek için iki partinin acilen beraber çalışması gerektiğidir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Çocuklar, Türkiye, AKP, CHP, Cumhuriyet, parti programları, seçim beyannameleri

Introduction

This article aims to evaluate how the two political parties in Turkey that receive the most votes approach the problem of “children and violence”. The evaluation has been realized through a comparison of the party programs and the bulletins from the last election, as well as the coverage in one of the national dailies over the last year (September 2012-August 2013). The parties in question are the ruling party, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party, JDP) and the main opposition party, *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (Republican People's Party, RPP).

Children's rights are human rights; in this arena Turkey participates in international alliances such as UNICEF (The United Nations Children's Fund), the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the Council of Europe (CE). It signed the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990 and ratified the Convention in 1994 (Libal, 2001). However, Turkey still needs to take many steps. The 2012 Turkey Progress Report prepared by the European Commission mentions that “With respect to *children's rights*, efforts are needed in all areas, including education, combating child labour, health, administrative capacity and coordination” (European Commission, 2012). According to *Cumhuriyet* (The Republic), a pro-secular newspaper that is preoccupied with human rights, Turkey has still not developed children's policies. In Turkey, children suffer from poverty, violence, child labor and sexual abuse. Children's rights to “life, development, protection, participation and discrimination” are violated (Atalay, November 20, 2012: 20).

A literature review shows that several aspects of Turkey's political parties have been compared through their election bulletins and/or party programs, including their approach towards foreign policy and the European Union (Oğurlu, May 26, 2011), education (Tok, 2012; Bulut & Güven, 2010) and gender policies (Terkan, 2010). However, there is no comparative work on the parties' approach towards children's rights. This article intends to fill the existing gap with a comparison of the JDP and the RPP mainly on their approach towards “children and violence”.

Information on the research

To provide some background on the parties at the center of the research, the JDP has headed a single-party government since 2002, which has meant that the RPP has functioned as the main opposition party during this period as well. The JDP won 47 percent of the popular vote in 2007 and 50 percent in 2011, while the RPP won 21 percent and 26 percent respectively (2011 Seçim Sonuçları, 2011). As for the ideological divergences between the two parties, the JDP declares itself to be both conservative and democratic. Although it has embraced politicians from all right-wing parties, its leading staff comes from former Islamist parties (Ahmad, 2005). Meanwhile, the RPP is the party established by Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey. It declares itself to be both secular and social democratic but does occasionally play the religion card for electoral purposes (Öymen, 2004).

For this research, the two parties' programs and bulletins from the last national election were compared on aspects related to “children at risk and in need of protection” with special reference to “violence”. This was supplemented with news search on *Cumhuriyet* covering the last year (September 2012-August 2013). *Cumhuriyet* was founded in 1924 and has a daily circulation of 60,000. This daily was chosen because of its reputation for focusing on human rights issues, in order to reveal which issues of children's neglect and abuse the politicians on each side emphasize, and how their declarations relate to the official promises made in party discourse.

Comparison of the party programs

The JDP has made three main promises in its program with respect to the problem of “children and violence”. Firstly, the party promises voters that it will implement ILO standards and prevent child labor. Secondly, it supports projects to resolve the problems of street children. Thirdly, it encourages citizens to act as “foster families” to children in need. In other words, on one hand, the JDP intends to prevent children from finding

themselves on the street, while on the other hand, it works to accommodate, educate and rehabilitate affected children so they may be reincorporated into families and society (AKP, 2001).

The RPP, just like the JDP, promises to protect street children, to encourage foster parenthood and motherhood (CHP, 2012: 271, 330) and to block child labour (CHP, 2012: 271). The RPP has made three additional promises. Firstly, the main opposition party includes juveniles in its program, intending to re-organize juvenile court and punishment systems. Within this framework, the RPP intends to work towards preventing juvenile crime, changing rules so that juveniles are housed in different prison facilities from adults, and to establish professional training programs inside the penitentiaries (CHP, 2012: 40, 41). Secondly, the RPP intends to work to prevent child marriage (marriage under the age of 18) (CHP, 2012: 58). Thirdly, it intends to cover youth aged 16-18 working in agriculture, cattle breeding and forestry under the social security system (CHP, 2012: 284).

A comparison of the JDP and RPP party programs on the issue of “children and violence” shows that the main opposition party makes more promises than the ruling party. This situation could be explained by a concern on the part of the RPP to make itself more attractive to voters.

Comparison of election bulletins

Although the two parties make promises in several areas regarding children in their election bulletins, those related to the particular subject of “violence” are few. The JDP, which has been in office since 2002, also aims to help juveniles, alleviate youth drug use, prevent child labour, open youth centers and grant scholarships, and encourage the existence of foster families (AKP, 2011: 91, 92, 106, 110, 113). The main opposition RPP has made similar promises, including the prevention of juvenile crime (CHP, 2011: 57) and child labor (CHP, 2011: 66).

A comparison of the election bulletins shows that the JDP has made more promises than the RPP on subjects related to “children and violence”. It seems that the JDP bridges the gap between the two party programs in its election bulletin.

Politician declarations between September 2012-August 2013

Three declarations have been made on the subject of “children and violence” made by JDP and RPP politicians that appeared on *Cumhuriyet*, in between September 2012-August 2013.

In the one and only declaration by a JDP member on the subject of “children and violence” appearing in *Cumhuriyet*, Minister of Interior Affairs İdris Naim Şahin asserted that the PKK, the Kurdish terrorist organization, deceives or kidnaps children in order to replenish its membership. According to Şahin, more than one thousand children from southeastern Turkey are “on the mountain” without knowing what they are actually doing (Cumhuriyet, December 1, 2012: 8).

The two news items in which RPP members have made declarations appear in the wake of rape cases that took place in Antalya and Şanlıurfa. In the first case, RPP Penitentiaries Observation Committee members Nurettin Demir, Veli Ağbaba and Özgür Özel discussed claims by youth in juvenile penitentiaries in Antalya that they were being raped after being given drugs in their beverages (Sayın, May 30, 2013: 4). The second case involved the death of a three-year-old girl in Şanlıurfa. The provincial governor’s office announced that the child had choked on a trinket, but she was rumored to have died after being raped. RPP deputy Umut Oran (İstanbul) asked the JDP minister in charge of Family and Social Policies what happened to Dilan, while Aylin Nazlıaka (Ankara) declared in the press that the girl’s little body had exhibited signs of physical trauma (Cumhuriyet, September 13, 2012: 3).

According to the news search, the JDP member draws attention to youth exploitation by the PKK, whereas the RPP members draw attention to rape cases. The RPP seems to have appropriated the issue of “children and violence” as a means by which to attack the government.

Conclusion

In their party programs and election bulletins, the ruling JDP and main opposition RPP make comparable promises to the voters regarding the problem of “children and violence”. Roughly speaking, the two parties promise to prevent child labor, fight juvenile crime and alleviate the problems of street children.

The news search reveals that politicians make very few declarations on the subject of “violence and children”. The JDP member draws attention to the issue of youth being exploited by a terrorist organization, while the RPP members focus on the issue of child and youth rape. The election bulletins do not necessarily offer suggestions on how such issues might be handled.

This research shows that the subject of “children and violence” is just another arena in which the two parties may display their ideological differences. For instance, the social-democratic RPP promises to work for the

prevention of child marriage and for the coverage of working rural children under social security, while the conservative-democratic JDP makes no such promises. The issues found in the news search focus on youth in the arms of terror and on child abuse. Election bulletins may specifically cover those problems. The main result surely is the need for collective work by the two parties to resolve the problem of “children and violence”.

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