

Analysis

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Summary: Under the AK Party's more than 11 years' rule, one of the most hotly debated topics has been "conservatism" and its rise in Turkey's politics. In contrast, little discussed but no less important is how the conservatives themselves have evolved over the same time period. This segment has experienced significant upward socio-economic mobilization, which they rightly attribute to the uninterrupted rule of the AK Party over the same period. And the success of the party, among other things, is linked by Turkey's conservative social base to the political dexterity of its charismatic leader, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Such a reading of events has caused a significant level of transformation in the thinking of conservative circles, which consequently informed a reshaping of their approach toward the state, politics, and political leadership.

Transformation of Turkey's Conservatism Under the AK Party

by Galip Dalay

Introduction

Islamic conservatives have been in the driving seat of Turkish politics over the last decade. This phenomenon has attracted wide interest in the subject of Islamic conservatism,¹ as can be seen by the growing body of literature on it. The common denominator of the majority of these works is that conservatism has been on the rise in Turkey over the last decade.

In contrast, little discussed but no less important is how the conservatives themselves have evolved over the same time period. As there is little doubt, unless something unexpected occurs, that they are going to remain at the helm of Turkish politics for the foreseeable future, it is important to pay attention to the evolution that has taken place within conservative circle.

This segment has experienced significant upward socio-economic mobilization, which they rightly attribute to the uninterrupted rule of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) over the same period. And the success of

the party, among other things, is linked by Turkey's conservative social base to the political dexterity of its charismatic leader, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Such a reading of events has caused a significant level of transformation in the thinking of conservative circles, which consequently informed a reshaping of their approach toward the state, politics, and political leadership.

Reconceptualizing the State

Turkey's mainstream (Islamic) conservatives have never had an anti-statist disposition. On the contrary, their political projection has been rather state-centric. However, the strict enforcement of secularism through state-machinery by Turkey's republican elites throughout the majority of the history of the republic has led to some level of alienation among (Islamic) conservatives, which in return has led this group to adopt a more critical approach toward the state. Yet, this stance was not tantamount to the rejection of the state; rather it was more critically focused on the state officials' "detached from people" approach, discriminatory practices against them, and secularizing policies. This critical approach

1 In this analysis, the term "conservatives" denotes the section of society in whose definition of identity Islamic and traditional values play the primary role. These values also shape their political orientations. Currently, the Islamic conservatives are believed to form between 30-35 percent of Turkish society.

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among conservatives toward the state, however, has gradually changed during AK Party rule.

First, the conservatives have gradually come to see the state and the government as the same. The distinction between two has almost disappeared in their perception. In this regard, an embrace of the government or the party has been gradually extended to include an embrace of the state as well.

Second, Turkey's over-centralized and over-sized state is a significant, if not primary, agent providing economic/career benefits. Due to this function, the state has come to serve as one of the main gateways of socio-economic upward mobility for the conservatives, a factor that further increases the legitimacy of the state in their eyes.

Third, historically, the state has been the primary mechanism used for social engineering in Turkey. It was the most effective tool utilized by the secular republican elites to craft, but also to enforce, a new secular, Western-oriented identity for Turkish society. This identity-imposing nature of the state drove a wedge between conservatives and the state and resulted in the alienation of this group from the state. Yet the composition of the state, i.e. its bureaucrats and its policies toward conservatives, have changed considerably in the last decade. Discarding its previous secularizing mission, the state has come to respect, if not align itself with, the values of conservative circles. For instance, previous discriminatory measures adopted by the state against the head-scarved students, public servants, and graduates of the religious vocational schools have been eliminated. In its place, the government has introduced measures such as elective religious courses. In addition, the composition of state officials has also changed – which has culminated in the increasing visibility of the public employees with a religious disposition over the last decade. These factors have further increased the legitimacy of the state among conservatives.

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Having said that, interactions between conservatives and the state over the last decade have not always been on the former's terms. Rather, both parties have influenced and shaped each other's identities and orientations. The conservative segment has successfully uploaded some of its values into the state structure and moderated the rigid secularism of the state.

This interaction, however, has also transformed the conservatives as well. They have mostly abandoned their more ideological demands. Their political language has become more secularized in comparison to the 1990s. Lastly, the growing identification of the party with the government and the state by the conservatives has resulted in the disappearance of their previous critical attitudes toward the state.

Politics and Parlance

During the early years of AK Party rule, the conservative/ Islamic political elites were cognizant of the legitimacy and security crises that they were having in the eyes of the political-bureaucratic establishment. The root cause of these crises was the identity of the (Islamic) conservative segment of society and its political manifestation. They regarded politics as a means to overcome this crisis. Informed by such recognition, the conservative elites pursued a sophisticated political agenda to gain legitimacy and security within the existing system. They adopted policies aimed at the mainstream and largely avoided policies they deemed unpalatable to the establishment.

With regards to the political and religious demands of their social base, they pursued the "politics of patience," which means that in order not to antagonize the military or secularist establishment, the government postponed delivering on the conservative segment's identity-related demands. Even when they attempted to meet their demands, they strove to frame them in a secular language of rights and liberties, instead of resorting to religiously charged language, which would have inevitably attracted the ire of the strictly secularist establishment. This largely continued until 2009-10. Since then, the government has been more forthcoming in meeting the demands of conservative circles and willing to utilize religiously tinged language. Three factors played primary parts in allowing such a change.

- First, there was a perception that the threat stemming from the military and other components of the previous



establishment had reduced led to the AK Party's recalibration of its politics and discourse. The AK Party cast aside the politics of patience and caution it had previously pursued. It became more sensitive and responsive to the demands of its conservative-religious base. There has been a recognizable Islamization of the AK Party's language. An emphasis on and promotion of Islamic values has become more common.

- Second, the Arab Spring also played its part in the party's more Islamic turn. The perception and image that Islamic Movements across the region were leading the way for change rekindled Islamic sentiments among the Islamic/conservative segment of Turkish society, resulting in a sort of soul searching. The causes of democracy and Islamism were seen in sync, which was also deemed as being in accordance with the *zeitgeist* of the time. Moreover, the conservatives believed that affinity with Islam rather than secularism, nationalism, or a combination of both, was set to become the new and "required" reference point and source of legitimacy for political movements preparing to come to power region-wide. Such a reading of the event emboldened conservatives to be more at ease with publically promoting their Islamic/conservative identities.
- Third, developments in Turkey since 2013 have further tilted the tide toward conservatism. The Gezi Park Protests and, in part, the coup in Egypt have revitalized a kind of *kulturkampf* in Turkey. This has reintroduced identity politics as the main hallmark of Turkish politics once again. In addition to the new discourse, this identity politics, premised on the conservative/Islamists versus secularists, have been a major force in the mobilization of people, both those taking to the street to protest the government and those attending the rallies that have been organized by the government to show solidarity since June 2013. The conservatives regarded both events as being directed against themselves, which in return formed their negative attitudes toward protesters. During the rallies, organized in the aftermath of the Gezi Park Protests, it was not only Erdoğan who adopted a more religiously flavored discourse; the attendees also mostly chanted religious slogans as well. Moreover, the turnout at these rallies has been considerably higher than in normal times, which confirms the assumption that in time of crises (informed by identity

politics), the government falls back on its most loyal social base (the Islamist/conservative base) and uses a language particularly crafted toward them.

Relationship to the Leadership

The approach of the conservative segment to political leadership is another area that has experienced a significant change over the last decade. Thus far, two leaders of the Islamic conservative camp have been able to make their imprint on the course of conservative-Islamic politics: Necmettin Erbakan (charismatic founder and leader of the pro-Islamic National Outlook Movement) and Erdoğan. Yet, the conservative social base did not relate to them in the same way and for the same purpose.

For conservatives, Erbakan was the ideological and religious leader of a movement that sought to reconnect Turkey with its civilizational hinterland and historical legacy, and carried cultural and values (mostly religious ones) struggles in the political and public sphere. His success was contingent upon how well he could promote his social base's cultural, political, and religious causes in the political arena, rather than serving as an agent for their socio-economic mobilization, which was a secondary goal at the time.

In contrast, Erdoğan is currently primarily the leader of a socio-economic mobilization, rather than just a conservative party. In other words, Erdoğan embodies the leadership of a class struggle, whose cultural and economic marginalization previously overlapped and reinforced each other. His success is dependent upon how successfully he remains as the primary figurehead of this socio-economic mobilization. A significant portion of the conservative social base sees an intimate tie between their socio-economic success and his political fortune. This psychology explains why over

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40 percent of AK Party voters — the highest rate for any political leader in Turkey — explain their vote for the party by referring to Erdoğan's leadership.

This is also why the opposition's expectations of their conservative candidate in the upcoming presidential election in August, former secretary general of Organization of Islamic Cooperation Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, seem likely to be left unfulfilled. Erdoğan's conservative/Islamic identity is not the only factor, and probably not the primary one either, for his continuing support from Turkey's conservative social base. Instead, it is his role as the primary architect of (Islamic) conservatives' socio-economic mobilization that earns him their support. As long as Ihsanoglu cannot situate himself as a viable alternative capable of taking over this mobilization, his conservative identity is unlikely to earn him similar support.

About the Author

Galip Dalay works as a researcher in the political research department at the SETA Foundation in Turkey. He is also the book review editor of *Insight Turkey*. His opinion articles have appeared in *AJE Opinion*, *AJE Magazine*, *Huffington Post*, *World Politics Review*, *Fair Observers*, and in major Turkish dailies.

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