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## **Political Opposition in Turkey: Reflections on Political Islam**

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### **Abstract**

Despite the common perception in the Turkish society on the ineffectiveness of opposition, the scholarly work is very few on the opposition movements. This paper aims to contribute by discussing whether there is a real opposition movement at the state/system level in Turkey, by focusing mainly on political Islam. The main argument of the study is that although political Islam is currently the most distinguished oppositional voice, it is also articulated to the state tradition failing to move beyond the founding principles of the state tradition.

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## **Introduction**

Existence of political opposition is critical for consolidation of democracies as opposition is an integral part of the checks-and-balances system. The idea of state, government, rule and authority, in this sense, is intertwined with the idea of opposition. Ironically, while the concepts regarding the state and the rule have produced a big literature, the studies on opposition are quite few in general, and very rare regarding the Turkish context.

One of the first studies on opposition is by Robert Dahl (1966) which focuses on the patterns and characteristics of opposition particularly in the Western democracies. Later studies, in a way, respond to the unexplored or less explored fields in Dahl's study in that they focus on the opposition patterns in non-democracies or non-liberal political settings and opposition beyond the political parties such as social movements and civil society organizations. Therefore, since the classical book of Dahl, entitled *Political Opposition in Western Democracies* (1966), opposition movements in authoritarian versus liberal democratic regimes, the characteristics of these movements, and the institutional and socio-demographic determinants of political opposition have been among the most discussed aspects of political opposition (Ionescu and Madariagia 1968, Schapiro 1972, Tokes 1979, Kolinsky 1988 and Rodan 1996). Political parties, social movements and civil society organizations are considered to be the main pillars of opposition, though the focus is usually on the political parties (Blondel 1997, 465). Nevertheless, today, many basic questions around the concept of opposition are still open to discussion. What really constitutes opposition? Can every criticism or disagreement with the government and/or its policies be considered as opposition? Can social movements and/or civil society

organizations really function as opposition? These are some of the questions that come to forefront in this respect.

In Turkey, politicians, commentators and social scientists from different ideological backgrounds and theoretical stances share the insight that opposition, in the sense of political party not in power, is not functioning. This issue has been a topic to a series of interviews in the daily *Radikal* (February 20-March 12, 2005). Lack or inadequacy of opposition is discussed by the columnists as well (Ünal, March 19, 2007; Kahraman, February 21, 2005). However, scholarly work on the nature and existence of political opposition in Turkey is very rare. It is possible to trace the question of opposition in some articles; nevertheless, it is quite difficult to find a study that directly focuses on “the” opposition in Turkey. The articles by Kahraman (2005) and Hazama (1996) are almost unique in this sense. Thus, this paper is by and large an exploratory study which builds upon the questions posed by Kahraman (2005); and tries to elaborate further. What opposition means in Turkey and patterns and functions of oppositional forces will be explored first. The main questions the paper explores are whether there is an opposition in Turkey questioning the basic premises of state tradition; and whether political Islam constitutes genuine opposition in this respect. In the paper, main focus is on the legal and within party system actors as unofficial or illegal groups are assumed to reject the basic systemic premises at the outset.

### **Conceptualization and Functioning of Opposition in Turkey**

The concept of opposition is used for the political party which is not in power at first. Therefore, this usage of the concept does not deal with the ideological positions initially, rather relies on the position of the party vis-à-vis the government. However, a

second usage of opposition at the social level reveals the underlying conflict in the concept. In the Turkish context, this usage might be traced back to the debate over the center-periphery cleavage (Mardin 1973), associating the center with the state tradition and periphery with the opposition and desire for change. Looking from this perspective, parties from the political right that criticize the practices of the state represent the opposition historically (Kahraman 2005, 3). The parties from the center-right criticize particularly the policies in the one-party period between 1923 and 1946; and they have varying degrees of emphasis on nationalism, Islam and conservatism. The center is also identified with the dominant culture, language and ideology, and, the main tenets of the state tradition can be summarized under the framework of civic nationalism, Westernization, secularism, and étatism (Heper 2000). Periphery and, thus, the opposition in this regard, might also be thought in multiple terms beyond the center-right parties. Those groups, which are excluded and controlled by definition of the aforementioned founding principles of the state tradition, namely Islamists, Alevis, and Kurds might be considered as part of the opposition in this sense. As far as the political left is concerned, given that majority of the Turkish electorate tend to vote for center-right parties since the beginning of the multiparty period (Waterbury 1992, 127), leftist parties are rarely incumbents.

Recently, a third usage of the concept has become discernible which increasingly embodies questioning the basic premises of the established state tradition, especially étatism itself. In this respect, European Union (EU) is an anchor (Kahraman 2005, 4) that motivates and fosters the attempts for democratization, expansion of individual rights as opposed to the tradition which subordinates the individual to the collective will; and, removal of ultra-nationalist sensitivities from the legal framework in favor of a multicultural setting. Moreover, the social movements and civil society organizations

ranging from those protesting headscarf-ban in the universities to farmers resisting gold-mining activity in Bergama to conscientious objectors against the compulsory military service are referred among the oppositional voices in the Turkish politics.

These varying usages of the concept reveals the lack of consensus on what opposition really means not only in the Turkish context, but also in the literature, in general, as well. Many groups including center-right parties, leftist movements and parties as well as peripheral forces, civil society groups and issue-specific organizations emerge among the critical political groups. In this context, how can we analyze the political opposition in Turkey?

In the literature, relying on the idea that the type of the opposition is somehow the product of the type of the government (Leca 1997, 568), scholars tend to first identify the state as liberal/democratic and non-liberal/non-democratic and then analyze the opposition. Neither this criterion nor looking for the general regional characteristics and applying them to the single country case might not hold in the Turkish case as both liberal and non-liberal elements as well as both European and Middle Eastern characteristics of the politics are discernible.

Another criterion to categorize opposition in the literature is whether the opposition is cohesive or diffuse (Blondel 1997, 470). Historically, the left and political Islam have been salient critical voices; and especially since 1990s, Kurdish groups have become powerful critiques of the policies. Thus, the oppositional forces in Turkey might be argued to be diffuse as there is no single and united center of opposition despite temporary alliances. As part of a third criterion, Dahl (1966) argues that socio-economic factors shape the characteristics of the opposition. In Turkey, income inequality, poverty, sectarian divisions, regionalism, urban-rural differences and ethnicity are important factors that

might lead to polarization. Therefore, this criterion might explain issues such as Kurdish movement for ethno-cultural rights, Alevi-left alliance and rise of political Islam to an extent. However, not all socio-economically disadvantaged groups become oppositional forces.

Lisa Anderson criticizes this usual emphasis on the social bases of opposition and argues that the nature of political structure is a more important factor in determining the opposition as opposition responds to the political structure (Anderson 1987, 219). Therefore, Anderson proposes analyzing the opposition at levels as opposition to the person/leader, policy, regime, and the state (Anderson 1987, 221). In the Turkish case, following Anderson, it might be argued that as the state tradition is quite *étatist* and protective in terms of the regime, Turkishness and the person of Atatürk; it is foreseeable that the oppositional forces focus on the policy level and refrain from the criticisms especially at the regime and state levels. This vindicates the arguments that in countries with strong state tradition, oppositional forces will either limit themselves to the policy differences or would be forcefully eliminated by the political system (Leca 1997, 576); therefore, it is very difficult for state-level genuine opposition movements to emerge and survive remaining within the political system. However, again following from Anderson, this might also mean that the potential for this kind of genuine political opposition can be found in these basic tenets of the state tradition. Before, discussing these issues, however, we need to clarify what we mean by genuine opposition movement at the state level in Turkey.

## **Revisiting the Concept of Opposition**

So far, the difficulties with analyzing political opposition reveal the need for differentiating between levels and degrees of opposition. In this paper, it is proposed that oppositional forces or oppositional elements which might function at the leader or policy levels are different than the opposition movements operating at the system/regime or state level. In this respect, the latter might bring substantial change in the existing order and is quite critical for consolidation of democracy. Thus, an opposition movement diverges from instant political reactions and criticisms. It requires organized political action reflecting social conflicts and proposing an alternative not only to the government but also to the established order (Kahraman, February 21, 2005). Accordingly, the distinguishing characteristic of an opposition movement at the state level, then, is questioning the basic premises of the establishment and state tradition. Providing viable proposals and maintaining popular support might be considered as corollary to this criterion. Here, one caveat should be noted, such an opposition movement is not necessarily anti-systemic. It might even be supportive of the regime type; however, it should question the basic premises of the state tradition and attempt to move beyond these premises.

## **Questioning the Opposition Movement(s) in Turkey**

In the Turkish case, if an opposition movement is defined in these terms, the basic premises to be questioned are étatism, nationalism, Westernization and secularism. Military is historically associated with direct and indirect influence on politics, therefore, the political autonomy of military (Cizre Sakallıoğlu 1997, 153) might also be considered among the basics of the state tradition. The corollary criterion of providing viable solutions and proposals, and maintaining popular support, on the other hand, requires addressing

socio-economic problems such as income inequality, poverty, and ethnic and sectarian discrimination. Addressing these issues then will lead us to question whether there is a real opposition movement at the state level in Turkey.

One of the shared perceptions within the debate of opposition in Turkey is that existing conditions, particularly in terms of inequality and poverty, provides a fertile ground for the development a leftist opposition movement in Turkey (Üskül, February 21, 2005). Nevertheless, it follows that the political left in Turkey does not provide such real opposition and do not provide alternatives. Indeed, even the difference of the centrist leftist parties from the center-right parties are questioned especially since 1980s (Kahraman 1993, 23).

A detailed discussion of the potential of the leftist opposition is beyond the scope of this paper. This discussion is relevant only in the context of ascertaining existence of opposition at the state level. The way the center-left parties have come into being, to a large extent, explains the failure of the leftist parties to form opposition in the sense of questioning the state tradition (Ekinici 2004, 97). The main center-left parties such as *DSP* [Democratic Left Party] and *SHP* [Social Democratic Populist Party] in Turkey are formed by the factions within *CHP* [Republican People's Party] which is the historical representative of the state tradition. Some authors argue that affiliation of the Turkish left with the state tradition is older than this period and can be traced back to the Young Ottoman and Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) line as the CUP influenced many movements ranging from Islamism to Westernism (Gültekingil 2007, 14). The connections with the founding state ideology and having roots in the anti-imperialist struggle during the Independence War incorporates the Turkish left to the state tradition, through nationalism (Aydın 2007, 544) and étatism (Gültekingil 2007, 14). This articulation is further



reinforced by the fact that the leftist parties are shaped around the idea of transforming the society rather than relying on the class politics (Aydın 2007, 575). The far left groups and parties, on the other hand, might be argued to question the basic premises of the state tradition, especially in terms of étatism, nationalism, dependency and the intervention of military to politics; nevertheless, these groups either fail to produce viable alternatives that sustain popular support or have already been crushed by the almost periodical military interventions. Therefore, the surviving elements of the Turkish left, is, in majority, articulated to the state tradition and fail to come up with a genuinely leftist agenda which proposes solutions and drastic changes for the disadvantaged and deprived groups in the society.

### **Is Political Islam an Opposition Movement?**

Having stated that the Turkish left has failed to become an opposition movement that would bring drastic changes to the established state tradition, political Islam, as the other main oppositional force in Turkey, needs elaboration. The potential for Islamist opposition stems from the way the Republic has defined itself. Secularism has been developed as the heart of the official ideology with an intention to create “modern secular-subjects” (Öncü 2003, 316) and has foreseen a struggle against the remnants of the *ancient regime* (italics belongs to Heper) (Heper 2000, 72) as part of the constitutive ideology of the newly established state. This might also be interpreted as an attempt to replace previous hegemonic leadership of values with a new organization of knowledge. Islam as the representative of the *ancient regime*, in this respect, has been increasingly identified as opposed to the constitutive center. Along with the leftist parties, therefore, Islamist parties attracted suspicion from the center and they have been banned from party politics

(Karaman and Aras 2000, 51). However, Islamist groups have been among the most active political groups in Turkey in the sense that these groups have taken every available opportunity to participate in politics since the beginning of multiparty period. The initial participation of pro-Islamists in the elections has been under broad-based center-right parties, *DP* [Democratic Party] and *AP* [Justice Party]. A specifically pro-Islamist party, *IDP* [Islamic Democratic Party] had been established immediately in 1951 (Yeşilada 2002, 63-64), however, it remained marginal; and pro-Islamists participated in politics under major parties until institutionalization of the *National Outlook* movement in early 1970s, which has extended its legacy to contemporary pro-Islamist parties (Yıldız 2003, 188). The first political parties emerged out of this movement are *MNP* [National Order Party] (1970), followed by *MSP* [National Salvation Party] after the closure of *MNP* during March 12, 1971 military intervention (Narlı 1999, 38-39). With another military intervention in September 12, 1980, *MSP* is also closed; yet, *Refah* [Welfare Party] is established immediately, and participated in general and local elections until its closure in 1997 by the Constitutional Court following the *February 28 Process* (Donat 1998). Once its successor *FP* [Virtue Party] shared its destiny, the intra-movement divisions resulted in two different parties, the conservatives formed *SP* [Saadet Partisi] and reformists founded *AKP* [Justice and Development Party]. The reason for giving this brief history of the official political Islam in Turkey is to show high level of adaptation and organization skills that survived the military interventions. High organizational skills might be explained by the available social organizations and networks provided through *tarikats* (religious orders), which the political left lacks. *Nakşi* and *Nurcu* groups are argued to be the main religious orders behind the official political Islam represented by the *National Outlook* movement (Yeşilada 2002, 69). Organizational infrastructure is not only important for

maintaining strong political opposition, but also for communicating with the masses. Therefore, compared with the left; political Islam seems to be in a more advantageous position to form a political opposition movement.

Looking at the discourse of the parties from the *National Outlook* movement, it is also possible to trace the criticisms directed towards the founding principles. To begin with, at least until the divisions within the *National Outlook* in the end of 1990s, the anti-Western stance of the political Islam has been relatively more consistent compared with other anti-Western groups such as hard-line Kemalists, ultra-nationalists and leftists. Moreover, Islamist criticism of the West is more direct and solid, goes as far as to the categorical rejection of the West compared with the inchoate anti-imperialist discourse of the left (Bora 2002, 251-252).

Considering the role of military, given that each and every party from the *National Outlook* movement has been banned from politics with intervention of military until 2000s, political Islam entertains an anti-militarist stance, if not a policy. Erdoğan's preaching down after the so called e-coup in April 27, 2007 that military is an institution ancillary to the civil democratic order (*Radikal*, April 29, 2007) might be interpreted as building on this historical conflict between the political Islam and the military. Not separate from its position on military's intervention to politics, political Islam's approach to the nationalism differs from the state tradition as Islam potentially provides a supra identity over the ethnic differences between Turks and Kurds. For instance, Erbakan had criticized the official state policy on the Kurdish issue explicitly (Narlı 1999, 43-44).

Finally, the criticism towards the established interpretation of secularism constitutes the crux of the political Islam. While the strong state tradition desires the religion to be controlled publicly and practiced privately; the Islamists insist on the regulation of the

religion privately and allowing its expression in the public sphere (Tank 2005, 14). At least equally importantly, Islamists are the only group that we can speak of, at least the argument of, a counter-elite which contests the constitutive Republican elite, conceptualized as the *historical bloc* by Kahraman (2005, 1) and composed of the bureaucracy, military and the intellectuals.

Given these powerful criticisms directed by the Islamists to the founding principles of the state tradition in Turkey, is it possible to argue that political Islam is “the” opposition movement Turkish left failed to become? In my opinion, going beyond the salient criticisms of political Islam and revisiting the Islamist discourse and practice might lead us to another conclusion. First of all, despite the rhetoric, the parties which attract the votes of pro-Islamist groups historically are not out of the existing state tradition. To begin with, the center-right parties which attract the votes of *tarikats*/Islamists such as *DP*, *JP* and *ANAP* have not questioned the constitutive principles of the Kemalist system (Kahraman 2005, 5). One can argue that the fact that these parties have an appeal to the Islamist electorate does not mean that they represent political Islam; however, it implies that pro-Islamists, which include even the organized groups under *National Outlook* might not be voting on the basis of opposition to the state tradition which has tried to ignore and exclude the Islamists. On the other hand, even explicitly Islamist parties do not usually move beyond the rhetoric and tone down as soon as they are in power (Özdalga 2002, 136). Having established three coalitions with parties of the establishment, with Ecevit in 1974, and with Demirel in 1977 and 1978; whether *MSP* is articulated to the state tradition is, at best, debatable (Albayrak 1989, 8). Even if being a coalition partner is a survival strategy, Erbakan also did not have ideological conflict with Demirel, who is argued above not to question the basics of the system (Shankland 1999, 90). Most importantly, the idea of *Just Order* which is proposed

by *National Outlook* movement does not reflect an integral demand for justice and change in the established order (Çiğdem 2004, 26).

As far as the basic premises of the state tradition are concerned, The *Just Order* shares étatist elements as it proposed a state-led economic development (Shankland 1999, 89). In terms of *Just Order's* étatism, Hakan Yavuz goes as far as calling it as *Green Kemalism* (Yavuz 2004, 600). This might be related to the anti-Western discourse of the Islamists with the expectation that state-led economic development might eliminate dependency on the West. However, the anti-Western stance of the Islamists has become questionable since 1990s as well. First of all, Erbakan did not put into practice the anti-Western elements in the election manifest such as establishing Islamic NATO or terminating the relations with international organizations after coming to power. After *Refah* is closed, anti-Western discourse gradually disappeared and the Islamists, beginning from the *FP*, have begun to employ a pro-EU stance with the expectation that the reforms will create room for religious rights and prevent further party closures which has reached its peak with *AKP*.<sup>\*</sup> The economic program has also changed in this process, from the proposal which is critical of both capitalism and communism (Shankland 1999, 101-102) to incorporation to the capitalism illustrated by the case of *MÜSİAD* [Independent Industrialists and Businessmen's Association] (Özdemir 2004, 839-841). Besides these inconsistencies in terms of étatism and Westernism, nationalism is argued to be a determining characteristic of the Turkish Islam (Mert 2004, 415). Proposing Islam as an identity over the ethnicity, Islamists seem to offer a proposal for resolution of Kurdish issue which is deviating from the official nationalist sensitivities on the surface; nevertheless, by

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<sup>\*</sup> Whether *AKP* is an Islamist party or not is still debated in Turkey. This debate is beyond the scope of this paper and the reason why *AKP* is mentioned here is that the party has historical attachment to the *National Outlook* movement.

the same token, the Islamist parties prevent politicization of the Kurdish identity (Yavuz 2004, 600). This might be considered as a different kind of ignoring differences and proposing another homogenizing alternative. Islamist opposition seems firmer on the last two pillars of the Turkish state tradition, namely militarism and secularism. However, I believe Islamists' criticisms towards military's involvement in politics is not an all-out rejection, but rather related to the staunchly secularist position of the military. On secularism, Islamists still seem critical; yet, *AKP* politicians declare their commitment to the secular system (Sabah, February 5, 2005).

Looking from the perspective of these issues, political Islam, on many issues, shares some critical elements of the state tradition. Ironically, 1990s mark the beginning of the period both for political Islam to become a massive force and for parties coming from the *National Outlook* tradition to increasingly distance themselves from Islam in favor of conservatism (Yavuz 2004, 600). This can be interpreted as the parties could not propose viable agendas to maintain mass support during the period when they emphasize Islamism, and when they managed to provide alternative policies they have already distanced themselves from political Islam. Finally, it should be noted that the reason why Islamists achieved to get public support since late 1980s is not only because Islamists performed opposition against the state tradition strongly, but rather because the 1980 coup made by the very guardians of the state tradition crushed the left, and initiated *Turkish-Islamic Synthesis* encouraged development of political Islam against Kurdish and leftist opposition.

## **Conclusion**

This paper elaborates on the concept of opposition specifically in Turkey. It asks whether there is a real opposition movement within the framework of democracy and party system in Turkey which would question the basic premises of the state tradition; and whether political Islam can be considered as an opposition movement in this respect. Main finding of the study is that neither the left nor the political Islam so far have moved beyond the tenets of the state tradition. The leftist parties that might have chance for seizing power are mostly incorporated to the state tradition. More radical parties are devoid of public support. All-in-all, the left does not provide viable alternatives and policies. Political Islam, on the other hand, proposes more direct and solid questions to the founding principles of the Kemalist system; however, the political parties from Islamist background are increasingly articulated to the state tradition as well.

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