



DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES OF TURKEY'S AK PARTY:
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS (2002-2015)

BY

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ABSTRACT

The *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP) in Turkey, or better known as the Justice and Development Party, has been accused of Islamising society through its conservative policies that overlap with discourses originating from the Islamic faith. At the same time, the AKP government has maintained that it abides by Turkish secularism. By using discursive analysis as its theoretical framework, this research identifies and analyses the extent to which the AKP's discursive strategy has changed over the years to discover whether the party truly has a hidden agenda or if the shifts serve as strategies to win votes. For this research, the thesis uses both qualitative and quantitative methods. By gathering data from primary sources such as official documents and newspaper articles, a document analysis was done to gather the frequency of specific terms appearing in these documents. Furthermore, secondary sources from articles were collected and analysed using process tracing to find out the reasons for the rising religious discourse. Finally, statistical analysis was done by applying the Pearson Correlation to test the relationship between religious discourse and political dominance. The thesis highlights how while the party has actively rearticulated religious discourse since 2002, there is a shift in religious discourse in which it has become more specific with imminent policy ramifications. The changes observed are related to the perceived threats faced by the party, with Islamic discourse rising and depleting with the amount of challenges it faces by other institutions within Turkey. As a result, the AKP cannot be said to be a party that had always intended to turn Turkey into a religious country. The strategies undertaken by the party in the last 13 years (2002-2015) showed that the shifts in discourse were to manage the support it received by conservative Turks, rather than as an upfront to the secular establishment.

ملخص البحث

لقد اتهم حزب العدالة والتنمية في تركيا بأسلمته للمجتمع من خلال سياساته المحافظة التي تتداخل مع الخطابات المستندة على العقيدة الإسلامية. وفي نفس الوقت ، تؤكد حكومة حزب العدالة والتنمية أنها تلتزم بالعلمانية التركية. وباستخدام التحليل الاستراتيجي كإطار نظري للحزب، فإن هذا البحث يفحص ويحلل مدى تغيير استراتيجيات حزب العدالة والتنمية الخطابية على مدى سنوات لاستكتشاف ما إذا كان الحزب لديه فعلا أجندة خفية، أم أن التحولات كانت بمثابة استراتيجيات للفوز بالأصوات. ويستخدم هذا البحث كلا من المنهجين النوعي والكمي. ومن خلال جمع البيانات من المصادر الأولية مثل الوثائق الرسمية والمقالات الصحفية، جرى تحليل الوثائق لجمع وتيرة المصطلحات الواردة في هذه الوثائق. علاوة على ذلك، فقد تم جمع البيانات من مصادر ثانوية من المقالات، وتحليلها باستخدام تتبع المسار لمعرفة أسباب الخطاب الديني المتصاعد. وأخيرا، تم إجراء التحليل الإحصائي بتطبيق نموذج بيرسون لاختبار العلاقة بين الخطاب الديني والهيمنة السياسية. ويسلط هذا البحث الضوء على الكيفية التي قام بها الحزب بإعادة صياغة الخطاب الديني بشكل فعال منذ عام 2002، فهناك تحول في الخطاب الديني الذي أصبح أكثر تحديدا مع تداعيات وشبكة على السياسات. وتتعلق التغيرات التي لوحظت بالتهديدات المتصورة التي يواجهها الحزب، مع تزايد الخطاب الإسلامي واستنزافه مع حجم التحديات التي تواجهها المؤسسات الأخرى داخل تركيا. ونتيجة لذلك، فإنه لا يمكن القول بأن حزب العدالة والتنمية هو حزب ينوي دائما تحويل تركيا إلى دولة دينية. وأظهرت الاستراتيجيات التي تبناها الحزب في السنوات الثلاث عشرة الماضية (2002-2015) أن التحولات في الخطاب كانت لإدارة الدعم الذي تلقاه الأتراك المحافظون، بدلا من أن يكون مسوغا لتأسيس العلمانية.

APPROVAL PAGE

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigation, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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*To my daughters, Raysa and Zayra:
Do not be afraid to find God and faith
through knowledge.
I did.*

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AKP	Justice and Development Party (<i>Adelet ve Kalkinma Partisi</i>)
ANAP	Motherland Party (<i>Anavatan Partisi</i>)
AP	Justice Party (<i>Adelet Partisi</i>)
CHP	Republican People's Party (<i>Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi</i>)
CUP	Committee of Union and Progress
DP	Democratic Party (<i>Damokrat Partisi</i>)
DSP	Democratic Left Party (<i>Demokratik Sol Partisi</i>)
DYP	True Path Party (<i>Dogyu Yol Partisi</i>)
EU	European Union
ENP	Effective Number of Parties
FP	Virtue Party (<i>Fazilet Partisi</i>)
GNA	Grand National Assembly
HDP	People's Democratic Party (<i>Halklarin Demokratik Partisi</i>)
HSYK	High Council of Judges and Prosecutors (<i>Hakimler ve Savcilar Yuksek Kurulu</i>)
IS	Islamic State
MGK	National Military Council (<i>Milli Guvenlik Kurulu</i>)
MHP	Nationalist Movement Party (<i>Milli Hareket Partisi</i>)
MIT	National Intelligence Organisation (<i>Milli Istihbarat Teskilati</i>)
MNP	National Order Party (<i>Milli Nizam Partisi</i>)
MSP	National Salvation Party (<i>Milli Selamet Partisi</i>)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NUC	National Unity Committee
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PKK	Kurdistan Workers Party (<i>Parti Karkerani Kurdistan</i>)
RP	Welfare Party (<i>Refah Partisi</i>)
SP	Felicity Party (<i>Saadet Partisi</i>)
US	United States of America

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

“Do you expect from us as a political party with a ‘conservative democrat’ identity to cultivate an atheist generation?” Recep Tayyip Erdogan (Tombus, 2013, p. 323)

Since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Islamic world has gone through multiple shifts in ideologies, shaping and altering the political course taken by governments in Muslim-majority countries. Following the fervour of Arab nationalism and socialism in the 1960s and 1970s, we have witnessed the rise of Islamist movements, especially strong in the wake of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. However, after the events on the morning of September 11, 2001 and the Arab Spring a decade later, moderate Islamist movements that seek a gradual change through the ballot box have been replaced by a more dangerous form of radical Islamist movements that are quickly gaining mass support such as the so-called Islamic State (IS) or *Da'esh*, Boko Haram in Nigeria, al-Qaeda affiliated groups and the Taliban in Afghanistan. The fact that radicalism is trumpeting democracy in the Muslim world (Ayoob, 2014) is a far cry from the aspiration of the majority of Muslims in the world that prefers democracy as a system of governance (Fattah, 2008). This is unfortunate because immediately after the break-out of the Arab Uprisings in 2011, we see moderate Islamist movements in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and *Ennahda* in Tunisia winning in free and fair elections, proving that the people are supportive of the rise of Islamist parties through peaceful means. More interestingly, these Islamist parties

have cited the Justice and Development Party, or *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP) in Turkey as a model for them to emulate.

However, the path that has led the AKP to form a strong and dominant government in Turkey is long and complicated, filled with many ups and downs. Turkey's history has been especially unkind to those who champion the right of Muslims to practice their religion freely in a constitutionally secular country. Immediately after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk led Turkey to independence in 1923, the Ottoman Caliphate, which was claimed by Turkish sultans starting in 14th century, was abolished in 1924. What came later was a period which saw secular reforms being introduced by Mustafa Kemal. This project of modernisation was propelled by Mustafa Kemal based on his belief that for Turkey to become a developed country, it needs to abandon centuries-old tradition for western institutions and culture.

Previously, the Ottoman Caliphate practiced the millet system whereby each religious group was given autonomy in choosing its leadership, collecting its own taxes and implementing its own religious laws and codes. Rather than continuing with the millet system, Mustafa Kemal's reforms render the millet system obsolete and put all matters of religion under the state control. This system of secularism is called laicism (from the French word *laïcité*) in which rather than having separation between the public and private sphere concerning matters of religion, the government has control over the public sphere which is obviously secular. In other words, religion is subordinate to the state. Therefore, in February 1925, the Grand National Assembly passed a law stating that religion is not to be used as a tool in politics. This law has a lasting impact on Turkish politics and more specifically on the balance that the AKP has to achieve in order for it to maintain its survival.

The first politician following the founding of the Republic who tried to re-introduce Islam into the public sphere was Adnan Menderes, who became prime minister after his party, the Democratic Party, won in Turkey's second free and fair election held in 1950. While Mustafa Kemal had banned the adhan (religious call to prayer) to be in Arabic in order to see through his project of Turkification, Adnan Menderes had campaigned for the adhan to be in Arabic again. Moreover, Adnan Menderes re-opened thousands of mosques across the country. This was against the law as he was seen as a leader who was politicizing religion for his own agenda or advancement in politics. In September 1961, Menderes was executed by the military junta who had organized a military coup more than a year earlier.

The next attempt to revive Islam in the public sphere was done by Necmettin Erbakan with the creation of the National Order Party or *Milli Nizam Partisi* (MNP) and the National Salvation Party or *Milli Selamet Partisi* (MSP) following the ban on the former. Based on his own ideology of the *Milli Gorus* (National View), Erbakan embarked on a series of reform to bring Islam back into the forefront of political and social life without openly going against Turkey's secularism as clearly defined in the constitution. Similar to the current AKP government, Erbakan cleverly masked Islamic values behind the rhetoric on justice and morality. Secularism to him is not a problem as long as it does not impede on the rights of Turks to practise their religion peacefully. At the peak of its popularity, the MSP was leading a coalition government with the ruling Republican People's Party or *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (CHP) in 1974. Unfortunately, the political instability faced by Turkey finally led to another coup by the military in 1980 with Erbakan and the MSP being banned from politics for the reason being that the party espoused religious rhetoric for political purposes.

Even though Erbakan and his newly-formed Welfare Party or *Refah Partisi* (RP) was not allowed to compete in the 1983 general elections, the leader of the Motherland Party or *Anavatan Partisi* (ANAP) which won the elections, also had a penchant for Islam. However, as prime minister, Turgut Ozal was reluctant to promote political Islam. Instead, he proposed a moderate view of Islam with a government project on the freedom of religious expression as he believed that it is not up to the government to limit the public display of religion. In a sense, Recep Tayyip Erdogan resembles Ozal in that a key strategy to champion Islam in Turkey is to choose a discursive strategy that promotes liberalism and freedom.

The penetration of Islam into the public sphere became more intense in 1995 when the Welfare Party under Erbakan won the highest number of votes and seats in parliament. For the first time in the history of the Republic of Turkey, an outwardly Islamist leader became prime minister. While Erbakan's statements supporting the role of Islam and Muslims in public appear similar to Erdogan's rhetoric, the fact of the matter is that Erbakan was more forthright in his Islamic agenda. On the other hand, Erdogan took his time and did not approach such sensitive subject in the first few years of his premiership. Thus, a mere two years into the RP-led government, the military led a soft coup and Erbakan resigned in June 1997. A year later, the Constitutional Court banned the RP for the same accusation of Islamising the country. The Islamists created another party called the Virtue Party or *Fazilet Partisi* (FP); however, in 2001, it was also banned by the Constitutional Court due to the leaders' continuous discourse on Islam's rightful place in public.

It was in this environment that some of the leaders of the previous Islamist parties decided that it was high time for them to shift their discursive strategy in order to survive in Turkey without the direct threat of either a coup or closure by the

Constitutional Court. Led by Erdogan, the younger generation formed a new party called the Justice and Development Party (AKP). The AKP is not just an impressive political party in comparison to previous Islamist parties because of its ability to attract votes, but it is also an extraordinary party as it is the only party in Turkish history to have increased its vote share in subsequent elections after coming to power in 2002 with 34.3% of the votes. In 2007 its vote share increased to 46.6% and in 2011 it went up further to 49.8%. As a result of Turkey's 10% threshold, the AKP won close to two-thirds of the seats in the Grand National Assembly (GNA) in all three parliamentary elections: 66% in 2002, 62% in 2007 and 59.3% in 2011 (Ozbudun, 2014). However, in 2015 the party faced a setback when it only won 40.9% of votes and 47% of seats, failing to secure a majority during elections held on 7th June due to deteriorating economic conditions in the country, rising authoritarianism and growing polarisation (Kemahlioglu, 2015). This led to a snap election on 1st November 2015, when the party regained its majority by winning 49.5% of votes and 58% of the seats in the GNA (Uras, 2015). Having experienced hardship under the tutelage of Erbakan, this new group of politicians were aware that for any of their agenda to see the light of day, the party must first of all gain not only the support of the people but the institutions as well. In other words, they have to allay the perception that the party was simply another manifestation of previous parties. One strategy that the party used is to limit Islamic rhetoric to avoid being accused of a secret Islamic agenda.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

As an Islamist party that has been in government for more than a decade, the AKP has been looked upon as a model by other Muslim-majority countries. The AKP has

captured the imagination of the world as the party that continues to win the votes of conservative Muslims in secular Turkey. One of the reasons for their success is the clever shift in discursive strategy from the previous incarnations of the party, thus conjuring up support for a modern Islamist-led government that is different from those in Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, after winning its third consecutive parliamentary election in 2011, the AKP has become bolder in pushing forward Islamic reforms and agendas that the opposition sees as threatening the secular nature of the state, at the same time jeopardizing the AKP's image as a moderate Islamist government. As a result, the party stumbled in the latest general election in 2015 where it received the majority of votes but with a reduced support by the electorates.

As the AKP continues to be successful at the ballot box, the government has become more authoritarian, risking not just its status as an inspiration to other Muslim-majority countries that aspire for democracy, but also risking isolation by the West (Fuller, 2014). Based on the 2016 World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders, Turkey is now 151st in the world, behind Myanmar, Russia and South Sudan, which indicates that Turkish authorities are intensely cracking down on the freedom of journalists and news outlets. Not only have anti-AKP television broadcasters seen their programmes taken off air, but columnists critical of the government have also been fired from their jobs, and in some extreme cases, imprisoned. Moreover, Twitter was blocked for several weeks in 2013 following the Gezi Park protests, while mainstream newspapers continue to fawn over Erdogan (Ozkan, 2014). All of these events point to a downward trend in Turkish democracy.

This thesis attempts to dig deeper into the role of a discursive strategy by the AKP that purposely limits Islamic rhetoric in public and how this strategy relates to

the party's ability to maintain its grip over Turkish politics. Even though it is widely known that the party is led by Islamists with objectives and missions that are not necessarily agreed upon by a significant portion of the population, the AKP's ability to stay in power is analysed for its unique trajectory in the decade since coming to power. For the AKP, it is imperative for the party to limit its confrontation with secularists while continuing to show its commitment to the Islamist cause. This conundrum makes this study an interesting and worthwhile endeavour. Understanding the discursive strategy that has kept the party in power has never been more crucial in this post-Arab Uprising era where there are other Islamist parties in the world that are struggling to enter the theatre of mainstream politics.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Turkey is an interesting case study not only because it is one of the few examples of a country that has an Islamist party in government, alongside Jordan's Islamic Action Front (IAF) and Morocco's Justice and Development Party (PJD), but also because of its strict adherence to secularism. It is intriguing how a government that is made up of an Islamist party uses the institutions in a secular country to utilise Islam as part of its political strategy to win votes. In fact, the AKP is no different from its secular predecessors who used state institutions such as the *Diyanet* (Department of Religious Affairs) to interpret Islam in terms of national unity (Pinar, 2014). Islam is merely one of several means to achieve a specific political goal even when secularism is maintained as an important tenet of the state (Ahmad, 2014). In other words, it should not be such a shock that an Islamist party can operate successfully in a secular nation where the relationship between the state and Islam is complex.

This research contributes to the scholarly debates around the strategies of an Islamist party in relation to its core mission, its relationship with the public, with other parties domestically, and the international Islamist movement. It also attempts to provide material from which other democratic Islamist parties can learn in planning and evaluating future works when they are in a more stable position to compete in national elections. With the consistent success of the AKP at the polls, many Arab commentators are beginning to assess the adaptability of the Turkish system to other countries in the Muslim world (Altunisik, 2005). Understanding the AKP's ability to walk the tightrope on the delicate issue of Islamising society in a secular nation might be of benefit to other Islamist movements that aspire to form a government that is accepted and supported by the majority of the people.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study aims to answer the following questions:

- i. What are the discursive strategies of the AKP based on the party programme, election manifestos, and government programmes?
- ii. How has the party's discursive strategy been utilised by the leadership to explain religion, foreign policy, identity and democracy in Turkey?
- iii. What impact does this shift in political strategy by the AKP have on the electorates in a democratic and secular Turkey and consequently its political dominance?
- iv. What are the reasons behind the AKP's change in strategy from when it was formed to the recent rise of Islamisation in the country?

1.5 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This thesis has the following objectives:

- i. To discover the AKP's discursive strategy from when the party was established in 2001 and to understand the shifts regarding its discourse on Islam in a country known for its staunch secularist nature.
- ii. To explain the way party leadership has engaged in the utilization of a specific discursive strategy in explaining important subjects to the masses.
- iii. To understand the impact of the AKP's shift in strategy on electorates who are split between supporters of the AKP's Islamist agenda and those who are concerned with the future of Turkey under an Islamist government.
- iv. To analyse the reasons behind the AKP's shift in strategy. In this respect, the thesis serves to test a number of variables, namely the domestic context and the popularity of the leaders, in order to explain the change in discourse through within-case analysis using counterfactual design and process tracing.

1.6 LITERATURE REVIEW

In the last few years, prompted by the growing strength of the AKP in Turkey, a number of scholarly works have been published that focus on the various aspects behind the amazing rise of the AKP and the level of commitment by the party towards the idea of moderation which contrasts with growing Islamic radicalism. This renewed interest in the AKP had scholars questioning the possibility of exporting the Turkish model to other Muslim countries in the Middle East (Cavdar, 2006). Before one can make such a suggestion, we need to understand the factors that allowed the AKP to successfully participate in the Turkish political process and its ability to maintain

power regardless of the threat it used to face by the military and secularist establishment. Cavdar (2006) argued that Turkey is a unique case because Islamists in Turkey have been afforded the opportunity to participate in the electoral process beginning with the multi-party era in 1946. Hence, it is claimed that it becomes apparent that the Turkish model will stay in its home country for the time being as not many Islamists can claim to have such a long period in participating in the electoral process. Of course, this was an interesting conclusion because, following the rise of the AKP and especially after the Arab Uprising, other Muslim states were interested in Turkey to provide a solution to their political upheaval.

While Cavdar's argument on the unique opportunities and constraints faced by Turkey is not exportable, this impression of the AKP's path concerning balance is not new. Somer (2014) also argued that electoral and nonelectoral incentives can bring about moderation or normalization of Islamist movements. Though, Somer claimed that when we are discussing the 'normalization' of Islamist parties, it needs to be understood in the context of the specific countries. In Turkey, it is 'normal' for the government to dominate society and suppress dissent. By using a chronological approach, the author shows that mainstream Islamists in Turkey have always been dynamic; however, what was considered as mainstream Islamism was controlled and manipulated by the secularist since the 1920s because they had control over the political institutions. Islamists in Turkey were put under many constraints following the abolishment of the Ottoman Caliphate by Mustafa Kemal. This is due to the nature of Turkish secularism or *laiklik* as introduced by Mustafa Kemal, which contends that the state and the political sphere should be free from any religious influences whether in the form of symbols or ideas. While Islam does not interfere with the state, the state has extensive control over the form of Islam to be practiced.