

“Restless Conservatives”

Turkey’s volatile kingmakers and the limits of nationalist hybridization

Evangelos Areteos¹

Recently, AKP and Erdogan have been facing challenges from their own backward, the “huzursuz muhafazakarlar” - the “restless conservatives”. This group's actions put into question how long the dominant narrative of Turkey’s grandeur can remain sustainable.

Keywords: Restless Conservatives, Turkey, AKP, Neo-Ottoman, Elections, Nationalism, Erdogan, Identity, Religion

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In the last years, AKP and Recep Tayyip Erdogan have been facing a rising challenge coming from their own “backyard” and commonly referred to as the “restless conservatives” (*huzursuz muhafazakarlar*, a term recently coined by the economist and pollster Can Selçuki)².

This group is lately estimated to represent approximately 10-15% of the total electorate³, and it is becoming the issue of a growing number of polls and sociological comments and researches, though its extend and full dynamics have not yet been thoroughly explored.

However, “the restless conservatives” emerge as the most pivotal, but also the most volatile factor in view of the next elections in Turkey. Additionally, their support to Erdogan and AKP is tenuously dependent on how long the dominant narrative of Turkey’s grandeur can remain sustainable. Polls and intrinsic undercurrents within this group – mainly linked to the deterioration of the economy – point towards an eventual fatigue of the ongoing nationalist hybridization, which is likely to have a significant impact on their future electoral behavior.

Although the concept of “restless conservatives” is new, this cluster of potential dissidents from AKP has started to discretely get shape after 2013 and Gezi

² Independent Türkçe, Cumhuriyet (2020) “Kamuoyu araştırmacısı Selçuki: “Huzursuz muhafazakarların” kulağı Davutoğlu ve Babacan’da”, <https://www.indyturk.com/node/200051/siyaset/kamuoyu-araştırmacısı-selçuki-“huzursuz-muhafazakarların”-kulağı-davutoğlu-ve>; published 22 June 2020. Date accessed: 20 October 2020

³ Özbey, İpek, Cumhuriyet, “Huzursuz muhafazakârın kulağı yeni partilerde”, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/huzursuz-muhafazakarın-kulagi-yeni-partilerde-1746630>; published 22 June 2020. Date accessed: 5 October 2020

demonstrations and was first spotted by scholars and journalists⁴, shortly after the June 2015 elections, when AKP lost the majority for the first time, and after the November 2015 elections when AKP re-emerged with a majority, but had already turned towards collaborating with the nationalist MHP.

Right after the 1 November 2015 elections, Etyen Mahçupyan, a Turkish journalist and writer who had served as the senior adviser to Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu in 2014-2015, spotted the dynamic of change within the conservatives by highlighting what he called “new conservatism”. He said, while referring to this group:

“the most important political lesson of these five months from June to November is the emergence of a new group that determines who deserves power (...) individualized religiosity, hybridized mental structures, a search for global norms (...) This is a 'new' modernization that can adapt to the post-modern world. In other words, it is clear that a politically archaic 'Islamist' stance from the past will not pave the way for power.”⁵

Who are these “restless conservatives”?

By the time of the general elections of 2018 and the municipal elections of 2019, especially in Istanbul, the dissatisfied conservatives had become one of the most challenging and the most volatile factors of Turkish electoral politics.

⁴ Mahçupyan, Etyen, Akşam Gazetesi, “Yeni muhafazakâr modernler”; <https://www.aksam.com.tr/yazarlar/etyen-mahcupyan/yeni-muhafazakar-modernler/haber-458454>; published: 5 November 2015. Date accessed: 1 October 2020. Necef, Mehmet Ümit, Center for Mellemøststudier, The New Kingmakers of Turkey: The “Conservative Moderns”; https://www.sdu.dk/-/media/files/om_sdu/centre/c_mellemoest/videncenter/artikler/2015/november/necef+article+nov+final.pdf; published November 2015. Date accessed: 3 October 2020

⁵ Mahçupyan, Etyen, Akşam Gazetesi, “Yeni muhafazakâr modernler”; <https://www.aksam.com.tr/yazarlar/etyen-mahcupyan/yeni-muhafazakar-modernler/haber-458454>; published: 5 November 2015. Date accessed: 1 October 2020

Challenging because, as the veteran Turkish pollster Bekir Agirdir suggests⁶, there is a significant dynamic of distancing from AKP within its conservative voters who are in a “grey zone”. The results of the municipal elections in Istanbul in March, and especially in June 2019, indicated that a small but significant part of conservative AKP voters did not vote for the AKP-MHP candidate, Binali Yildirim, but for Ekrem Imamoglu⁷. Volatile because, as Agirdir and also Selcuki⁸ suggest, while these conservatives are in the grey zone, it is not yet clear if and how many of them will vote again for AKP or for other parties, especially Babacan’s DEVA, Aksener’s IYI and Davutoglu’s Gelecek. However, according to Selcuki⁹ and Doğan¹⁰, Babacan’s DEVA is more likely to appeal to the significant part of this group and second to the DEVA, Aksener’s IYI.

According to Can Selcuki’s estimates¹¹, these “restless conservatives” represent about 10 to 15% of the total electorate, while in June 2020 Agirdir estimated that AKP has dropped from 45% to 30%¹². Selcuki suggests¹³ that the group is not homogeneous income-wise, but its common denominator is that these “restless conservatives” are urban dwellers. Sociologically speaking, they are also not very pious but conservative, who have emerged during the eighteen years of AKP government and have gained irreversible rights through political representation and also substantial financial benefits.

⁶ Sabuncu, Murat, T24, “Bekir Ağırdir: Muhafazakârlar AK Parti’den kitlesel kopuş yaşıyor, seçmenin büyük kısmı gri alanda”; <https://t24.com.tr/video/bekir-agirdir-muhafazakar-kitlede-cok-buyuk-bir-kitlesel-kopus-var-secmenin-cogunlugu-gri-alanda,26283>; published: 12 February 2020; Date accessed: 10 October 2020

⁷ Konda, 23 HAZİRAN 2019 SANDIK ANALİZİ VE SEÇMEN PROFİLLERİ; https://konda.com.tr/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/23Haziran2019_Istanbul_Sandik_Analizi.pdf; published: June 2019. Date accessed: 2 July 2019. Köylü, Hilal, DW; <https://www.dw.com/tr/cumhur-ittifaki-kendi-tabanından-koptu-mu/a-49342705>; published: 25 June 2019. Date accessed: 1 October 2020

⁸ Selcuki, Can, personal interview conducted by the author, 3 September 2020.

⁹ Selcuki, Can, *idem*

¹⁰ Doğan, Sevinç, personal interview conducted by the author, 9 September 2020

¹¹ Selcuki, Can, *idem*

¹² GazeteDuvar, “KONDA Genel Müdürü Bekir Ağırdir: AK Parti’nin oyu yüzde 30'lara düştü”; <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/politika/2020/06/06/konda-genel-muduru-bekir-agirdir-akpnin-oyu-yuzde-30lara-dustu>; published: 6 June 2020. Date accessed: 1 October 2020

¹³ Selcuki, Can, *idem*

Sevinç Doğan argues ¹⁴ that although not homogeneous, the “restless conservatives” could be defined within the frame of “urban, middle class, educated conservatives”. According to her, “being a middle class is not a determinant in itself, because there are now different new middle classes that have emerged during the AKP era”. Doğan also suggests that the core of the “restless conservatives” could eventually be geographically framed within the urban centers of western Turkey and much less in Central Anatolia and the Black sea regions, where President Erdogan and AKP keep their support bases very strong.

According to Doğan, education is the most decisive dynamic of this group that permits to its members to “communicate with different segments of society”, as they “do not look at the dominant stereotypes, they look more broadly. And they interpret religion differently”. Furthermore, the new generations of conservatives, “children of AKP parents” or the Turkish “Z generation” is an integral part of the “restless” group. As Doğan points out, “young people, whose parents’ vote for AKP may have different views. They are more realists about their future, about the administration of the country and they do not think they should be grateful to AKP for their situation”.

Worsening finances, status anxiety and a wider “malaise”

One of the main sources of the dissatisfaction of the conservatives are the deterioration of their financial situation and the fear that their economical and subsequent social/status acquis are under threat. Together with that, a wider “malaise” is nurturing the “restlessness” of this group, mainly because of a certain “fatigue” with Erdogan and AKP.

¹⁴ Doğan, Sevinç, *idem*

Selcuki argues¹⁵ that the group's perception is that their quality of life is backsliding, that they are regressing from what they have gained during the last eighteen years. This negative development is not just taking place in the economic realm. These groups are dissatisfied with the deterioration of governance and that the public services, from which they have been benefiting for a long time. And he suggests that there is a discreet ideological reason too: a feeling that the Erdogan and the AKP that they had supported for years are not the same anymore.

Similarly, Doğan argues¹⁶ that the main source of the group's "restlessness" does not stem from an ideological break or difference, "after all, they speak from the same habitus and continue to have similar lifestyles" with the other traditional AKP voters. However, Doğan highlights that together with the growing criticisms concerning the worsening of the economy and the mismanagement of the Syrian refugees, AKP's overshadowing by Erdogan and the changes in the party structure has also began to pose a problem. Party district heads and administrations have changed. This also means a change of patronage networks. Same goes with mayors and their networks, which, in the end, puts aside the local dynamics and the voting concerns to the benefit of the primary concern which is absolute loyalty.

In addition to the worsening economical situation, the threat to the social acquis and the reticent alienation from AKP, Mustafa Öztürk, a Theology academic and prolific writer, points to a deep source of "malaise" that has to do with the long-time psychology of "victimization". The psychology of victimization is, in fact, dominant amongst the conservative segment and a major force of political mobilization within AKP. Similarly, the deception felt amongst them because of the difficulty to pass over this perception to the younger generations. Therefore, according to Öztürk,

¹⁵ Selcuki, Can, *idem*

¹⁶ Doğan, Sevinç, *idem*

“another factor that makes conservatives uneasy and unhappy is the perception that their political drag is coming to an end, and that the sense of gratitude felt by conservatives, who have suffered a lot of victimization and survived numerous political troubles, is not possible to pass on to their children, and hence the apparent dissolution and backlash in the young generation voters. It is an anxiety that the power is left without a future (...)”¹⁷.

“Turkey’s generation Z turns against Erdogan”¹⁸

This wider generational gap between conservative parents-AKP voters and their children is emerging as another challenge for Erdogan and AKP. This is particularly due to the “restlessness” of the younger generations of conservatives that seems to generate from different world views and from a growing feeling amongst the youth that they are not “indebted” to President Erdogan and AKP. This trend is on rise, despite the systematic efforts of the government to create a “pious generation” of youth loyal to President Erdogan and his party.

In his analysis based on recent data¹⁹, Max Hoffman argues that the support of young conservatives to Erdogan is waning. He argues “these young voters have come of political age entirely under AKP rule, with President Erdoğan dominating public life. Even so, this group is far from becoming a “Generation Erdoğan” devoted to the president and is largely unenthusiastic about him and his party. These voters are generally respectful of his legacy, especially on behalf

¹⁷ Öztürk, Mustafa, Karar, “Huzursuz Muhafazakârlık”;
<https://www.karar.com/yazarlar/mustafa-ozturk/huzursuz-muhafazakrlik-1574022>;
published: 11 July 2020. Date accessed: 11 July 2020

¹⁸ Tol, Gonul; Alemdaroglu, Ayca, Foreign Policy, “Turkey’s generation Z turns against Erdogan”;
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/15/turkey-youth-education-erdogan/>; published: 15 July 2020. Date accessed: 24 July 2020

¹⁹ Hoffman, Max, Center for American Progress, “Turkey’s President Erdoğan Is Losing Ground at Home”;
<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2020/08/24/489727/turkeys-president-erdogan-losing-ground-home/>; published: 24 August 2020. Date accessed: 30 August 2020

of religious people, but they are not excited by him or the AKP. Many still see Erdoğan as the “best of the bad options” and struggle to imagine alternatives, but he is also the embodiment of an establishment that is seen to be failing young Turks, whose unemployment rate hovered around 25 percent even before the coronavirus pandemic further devastated the economy”. Hoffman stresses that “in every survey CAP has conducted, younger Turks are less supportive of Erdoğan and the AKP than their older counterparts. This is important: 18- to 29-year-olds are now the largest demographic voting bloc in Turkey,⁹ and each year millions of Turks reach voting age; several million more will join the voting ranks before the next scheduled election in 2023”.

The growing perception amongst the youth that their meritocracy is not enough to advance financially and socially is also a factor of alienation of the younger generations. As Doğan argues²⁰, “the issue of merit is an important factor. Having graduated from a university does not seem enough to advance in Turkey. It is necessary to find a connection, to find acquaintances. Young people are aware of the injustice this creates.” Dogan also stresses that the young generations, the post-2000 generations, are more open to international interactions. They have very different encounters with the Internet. Politically, they do not have the boundaries that their parents have. They think broadly and differently.

In other words, the younger generations are getting distant from religion, or at least the religion as practiced by their parents and the religion that President Erdogan and AKP want to enforce through their “pious generation” policies. This has a direct impact on how the youth perceive Erdogan and his power. This view has been echoed by Gonul Tol and Ayca Alemdaroglu. They argue²¹ that religious schools (*imam hatip*) have little appeal among Turkish youth, as religiosity is much lower in the younger generation, and growing numbers of young people —

²⁰ Doğan, Sevinç, *idem*

²¹ Tol, Gonul; Alemdaroglu, Ayca, *idem*

even students at imam hatip schools — are rejecting Islam altogether. According to them, “feeding the youth revolt against Erdogan is the worry about increasing authoritarianism and the curtailment of freedoms... An overwhelming majority of the new generation that has grown up under Erdogan wants to move abroad in search of freedom and opportunity”²².

Is nationalism enough?

Despite the grievances, the distance, and the dissatisfaction amongst the “restless conservatives”, nationalism is now functioning as the major force of consolidation of support to Erdogan and his party. Notwithstanding, the modernization that is occurring amongst the conservatives and the various forms of social and anthropological hybridizations, nationalism seems to be the most common appealing factor and Erdogan is still hailed as a true national leader when it comes to foreign policy and nationalist identity.

Doğan²³ stresses that despite the fact that some of Erdogan’s supporters complain about the aggressive foreign policy, Erdogan still stands out as the national leader who took Turkey out of the West’s hegemony, and that even those who criticize Erdogan do perceive him as a statesman in foreign policy.

Similarly, Tol and Alemdaroglu argue²⁴:

“[Even] if Erdogan has largely failed to mold the new generation to support him, his efforts were not wasted entirely. Since 2015, he has built his electoral strategy on an anti-Kurdish platform (...) At the same time, he has promoted an increasingly anti-Western Turkish nationalism that seeks to expand Turkish power in the region. Nationalist and anti-Kurdish sentiment has found strong support among both secular and conservative

²² Tol, Gonul; Alemdaroglu, Ayca, *idem*

²³ Doğan, Sevinç, *idem*

²⁴ Tol, Gonul; Alemdaroglu, Ayca, *idem*

youth, making them less tolerant toward the Kurds' demands for equality. Kurdish youth holds similarly skeptical attitudes vis-à-vis ethnic Turks".

They further argue that,

"Erdogan's nationalism has also turned to "civilization" rhetoric, particularly since 2012. The country's Muslim roots and imperial Ottoman past are often glorified. These efforts seem to have paid off: Many young people now identify themselves as part of the Middle East, unlike previous generations under more secular, Western-oriented governments. But their hopes and aspirations tell a different story. They want to get a secular education and live in a modern, free, and democratic country. They prefer living in Europe over the Middle East".

However, nationalism in current Turkey has become a far more complex phenomenon than it used to be, mainly because of the emergence of neo-Ottomanism and its expansionist ideology. While the "traditional" Turkish secular nationalism is rather defensive and conventionally more restraint within the limits of Turkey, neo-Ottomanism is an expansionist narrative of Turkey's grandeur beyond its borders. This expansionist narrative has now been blended with the traditional nationalism and has given birth to a hybrid neo-Ottoman nationalism that has permeated the society and the state. The most obvious and thriving example of this hybridization is the *Mavi Vatan* (Blue Homeland) naval dogma that drives Ankara's policies in the southeast Mediterranean.²⁵

As long as the narrative of grandeur is sustainable, it can continue to operate as a counter-balance to the economic adversities and anxieties of the "restless conservatives". The most significant part of them would likely continue to vote

²⁵ Areteos, Evangelos, Diplomatic Academy, University of Nicosia, *Mavi Vatan and Forward Defense. The Sinuous Journey of a Republican and Imperial Hybridization*; <https://www.unic.ac.cy/da/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2020/07/Mavi-Vatan-and-Forward-Defence-Evangelos-Areteos.pdf>; published: 7 July 2020. Date Accessed: 14 October 2020

for Erdogan and AKP, despite the fact that their loyalty to them is continuously shaken by economic hardships, status, anxiety, and the spreading “malaise” amongst them.

Nevertheless, as soon as the expansionist dimension of the neo-Ottoman and secular nationalism becomes unsustainable, the current dominant narrative of Turkey’s grandeur will face vital challenges, with the support of the “restless conservatives” to Erdogan and AKP not being able to survive.

A dynamic of weakening of the counter-balance strength of the grandeur narrative is already timidly traceable in polls. It is also likely that the more the economy fails to meet the expectations of the “restless conservatives”, the more volatile their support to Erdogan and AKP will become.

Selcuki argues²⁶ that foreign policy is not an issue of dissatisfaction for the “restless conservatives” and that Erdogan’s stance in foreign policy is still his biggest advantage. However, he explains that “the cost of living and unemployment have become no longer overshadowed by other agendas created by the government. The power of developments that cause instant increases in voting rates, such as the stance in foreign policy, opening Hagia Sophia to worship, and the discovery of natural gas, is gradually decreasing.”²⁷

The neo-Ottoman and secularist nationalism hybrid will also be shaken and ultimately split by the failure of the grandeur narrative. Turkish nationalism could eventually retreat to its traditional Kemalist introversion, while neo-Ottomanism could withdrawal to the more liberal ideology of AKP’s beginning, back when the party was operating and perceived as a “conservative-democrat” movement.

²⁶ Selcuki, Can, *idem*

²⁷ Kılıç, Leyla, Cumhuriyet; “Selçuki, geçen haftanın anketini Cumhuriyet’e açıkladı”; <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/selcuki-gecen-haftanin-anketini-cumhuriyete-acikladi-1772461>; published: 10 October 2020. Date accessed: 11 October 2020

The recent poll presented by Selcuki²⁸ could be revealing of this potential split dynamic since, while AKP and MHP record significant decrease, Meral Aksener's IYI, which has emerged as the party's most traditional and introvert type of secularist nationalism, is increasing, presumably attracting more "restless conservatives" amongst the wider range its potential voters. Furthermore, Ali Babacan, representing the more liberal trend amongst the "restless conservatives" has significantly increased his percentages when it comes to politicians being perceived as capable to solve Turkey's economic problems.

Conclusion

Today, it is not religiosity/Islam but nationalism that binds these dissatisfied conservatives as well as different generations together in supporting President Erdogan and AKP.

However, the current state of the Turkish dominant narrative, having been transformed from an introvert secular nationalism into an expansionist dogma of nationalist grandeur, seems to be reaching its limits as a counter-balance to the economic grievances and anxieties of the "restless conservatives".

Therefore, the volatility of this group's support to President Erdogan and AKP is likely to rise significantly, making the "restless conservatives" the most decisive kingmakers in the Turkish political and social juncture.

²⁸ Kılıç, Leyla, *idem*