

Attempting to Map the Turkish Electorate AKP's Challenge of Religious Voters' Disaffection

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ATTEMPTING TO MAP THE TURKISH ELECTORATE

AKP's Challenge of Religious Voters' Disaffection

This work focuses on society, religion, and the testing of the Islamist mobilization in Turkey. It examines the reasons behind voters' disaffection, with a particular focus on the more conservative and religious elements in society.

In the second half of January 2022 the famous Turkish singer Sezen Aksu came under heavy fire from Islamist groups and personalities because of one of her song's lyrics: "Say hello to those ignorant Eve and Adam". The song, "Şahane Bir Şey Yaşamak" (It's a great thing to live) was released in 2017. However, it was only in the second half of January that a group close to AKP sparked the whole affair, accusing Sezen Aksu of attacking religious values. The accusations quickly escalated to an issue of harsh political confrontation.

This latest clash between what could be seen as Islamist militantism versus secular values and aesthetics is undoubtedly revealing the depth of polarization in Turkey. At the same time, it also raises a question concerning the limits of Islamist mobilization: Specifically, how capable are these kinds of publicized surges of Islamic sensitivities to mobilize Islamist/conservative voters and more broadly, how capable is the wider instrumentalization of Islam in consolidating AKP's supporters in the long run?

While Turkey has entered a long pre-election period and, despite the fact that elections are officially to be held in June 2023, the deep social changes that have been operating through the Turkish society, and most particularly amongst the conservative/Islamist segments of it, are emerging as potential challenges for a mobilization based on Islam and Islamism.

Islamism as an instrument of consolidation and mobilization is not a new political and social phenomenon in Turkey. However, the past few years the Turkish government and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan seem to be more in need of consolidation since the dynamics recorded by the polls show that AKP has been losing ground amongst the Turkish electorate. Kemal Özkiraz, head of Avrasya Araştırma², calculated the electoral dynamics from 103 polls³ in 2021 conducted by 21 different polling companies indicating the downward trend of AKP and President Erdogan since the last elections in 2018 when AKP had won 42,5% of the votes. In the beginning of 2021 AKP was at 37%, but by December 2021 it was

² Translated into "Eurasia Research" in Turkish, the Eurasia Public Opinion Research Center conducts research on people's preferences in political and social fields

³ <https://www.haberler.com/ozkiraz-21-farkli-sirketin-yaptirdigi-103-14650524-haberi/>

as low as 31%. The same weakening trend was recorded for MHP which was at 9,2% in the beginning of 2021 falling to 7,3% by the end of the year. According to the same calculations, CHP moved from 24,1% to 26,7%, IYI from 13,5% to 14,8% and HDP from 10,2% to 10,7%.

The ongoing economic hurdles are the main cause of this downward trend and it is happening despite the government's systematic effort to keep re-consolidating its supporters through Islamist mobilization. The efforts' range is very wide and include, among others, official Islamic argumentations for the unorthodox low interest politics, enhanced religious education, the empowerment of the vocal Diyanet (the super-powerful Directorate of Religious Affairs) which focuses on daily life practices and behaviors, and official discourses against western arts.

However, deep social changes in the Turkish society, including amongst the conservatives, seem to be a major challenge for the success of such a mobilization. The current dissatisfaction of the conservative/Islamist voters and their distancing from AKP is undoubtedly sparked by the negative economic circumstances. However, deeper structural challenges also have a role to play.

Constant and deep social and anthropological transformations of the ways of religiosity and of the relationship between identity and religion, are about to test both the influence of Islamic instrumentalization in the next elections as well as the longer-term capacity of Islamic narratives to decisively consolidate the voters of the conservative right in Turkey.

According to Bekir Agirdir⁴, head of KONDA research, those who define their lifestyle as "modern" increased from 27,3% in 2012 to 37,2% today. "Traditional conservatives" were 45,9% in 2012, and 41,6% today, while the "religious conservatives" percentage decreased from 26,8% to 21,2% today.

Those who defined themselves as "atheists" were just 0,7% in 2008, but 4% in 2021. "Unbelievers" increased too, from 1,4% in 2008 to 4,1% in 2021. "Believers", in the same period, increased from 30,3% to 35,5%, while "Religious people" decreased from 54,2% to 46,6%, and "pious people" decreased from 12,4% to 10,3%.

While for the "religious conservatives", religion/Islam is the most dominant component of their identity, for the "traditional conservatives", religion/Islam is not the dominant component while for the "modern" religion/Islam is clearly the less/least important component. The same goes for "pious people", "religious people", and "believers". As such, religion's/Islam's dominance in personal identities seems to be weakening.

⁴ <https://t24.com.tr/yazarlar/bekir-agirdir/dindarlar-ve-ak-parti,33615>

These findings identify a secularization trend; a trend of distancing from religion and traditional religiosity by actually adopting secularized social and anthropological behaviors, revealing the deep transformations that shake Turkish society and that go against the efforts and the aspirations of the government.

These trends are confirmed from the “Turkey Trends – 2021” survey conducted by Kadir Has University⁵: those who defined their political view as political Islamists (and until 2019 as “religious”) decreased from 21% in 2016 to 9% in 2021 while those who defined themselves as “conservatives” increased from 22,6% in 2016 to 27,5% in 2021. “Conservative” here implies that Islam is not the first political identity. This is confirmed by the fact that the second closest political view is “political Islamist” for 30,5%.

Islam seems to become a secondary political identity while the social Islamic identity seems to have entered into a path of fragmentation. Agirdir highlights that the religious AKP voters are experiencing some intense contradictions and difficulties., The main reasons for these contradictions are the intertwined processes of delayed modernization, urbanization and individualization, as well as the transformation that emerged in the world of conservatism and the effects of rapid economic development initiatives.⁶

Max Hoffman from the Center for American Progress argues:

“The working- and middle-class religious conservative and cultural traditionalists who have long been the core of the AKP are still a plurality, but among the younger cohorts they do not seem to enforce norms among the group the way core AKP supporters tend to do in groups comprised of older voters. There is a great deal more heterodoxy among young conservatives”.⁷

Furthermore, young conservatives seem to distance themselves from AKP. This trend was recorded in a KONDA survey⁸ on AKP voters showing that, while in 2010 36% of AKP voters were young people between the ages of 18 and 32, in 2017 the number decreased to 28%.

AKP voters, and especially the younger generations, are caught in the middle of a great dynamic of urbanization: in 2010, 28% of AKP voters came from the countryside, 29% from towns and 42% from metropolitan cities, while in 2017

⁵ <https://www.khas.edu.tr/tr/haberler/turkiye-egilimleri-arastirmasi-2021-sonuclari-aciklandi>

⁶ <https://t24.com.tr/yazarlar/bekir-agirdir/dindarlar-ve-ak-parti,33615>

⁷ <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/turkeys-president-erdogan-losing-ground-home/>

⁸ <https://konda.com.tr/tr/rapor/secmen-kumeleri-ak-parti-secmenleri/>

20% came from the countryside, 35% from towns and 45% from metropolitan cities.

Education is also changing deeply the identities and perceptions of the younger generations of AKP voters. For instance, in 2010, 64% of AKP voters had graduated at a level below high school, 20% from high school and 6% from a University, while in 2017 the numbers were 66%, 23% and 10% respectively. The efforts of the government to create a “pious generation”, mainly through religious schooling (imam hatip), that would live according to the traditional religious precepts and values seems to have reached its limits. According to Murat Gezici of Gezici Araştırma Merkezi⁹, the population rate of the Z generation (those born after 1999) will be around 12%, and about 80% of this generation will not vote for the AKP.

Overall, all the aforementioned data confirms a deep trend of modernization and of hybridization of identities and, as Angeletopoulos and Areteos argue, “contrary to the prevailing view of Turkey being gradually and irrevocably Islamized, Turkish society is moving rapidly towards secularization rather than returning to traditional attitudes and behaviors influenced by religion”¹⁰.

Consequently, the societal transformation is testing the limits of Islamist mobilization and instrumentalization of Islam. For example, there is an increase of women who do not cover their heads, from 68,8% in 2020 to 70,5% in 2021¹¹. The number of those who think that the polarization in Turkey is between seculars and religious fell from 43,5% in 2019 to 39,4% in 2021. Amongst AKP voters, this number fell from 41,9% in 2019 to 37,9%¹² in 2021, showing the limits of the narrative that tries to highlight the opposite.

Last but not least, AKP voters are steadily climbing the economic and social strata of the society, making them more sensitive to social status and financial and social/class acquis. In 2013, 20% of AKP voters were classified “low income”, 38% “low middle class”, 26% “higher/new middle class” and 16% “high income”. In 2017 22% were “low income”, 31% “low middle class”, 31% “high/new middle class” and 17% “high income”¹³.

⁹ <https://t24.com.tr/haber/gezici-arastirma-merkezi-baskani-murat-gezici-z-kusaginin-yuzde-75-i-akp-ye-oy-vermeyecek,941593/>

¹⁰ <https://www.greeknewsagenda.gr/interviews/reading-greece/7012-“turkey-the-train-of-the-great-modernisation”-interview-with-george-angeletopoulos-and-evangelos-aretaios-on-hybrid-identities-and-subverting-the-clichés>

¹¹ <https://www.khas.edu.tr/tr/haberler/turkiye-egilimleri-arastirmasi-2021-sonuclari-aciklandi>

¹² idem

¹³ idem

The economic and social ascension of AKP voters and the creation of a new middle class of conservatives/Islamists is making AKP voters very sensitive, both to the economic developments and their subsequent welfare, but also to the preservation of their social and class status.

Intrinsic to all these social changes and identity transformations, is the distancing between a significant segment of the conservatives/Islamists/AKP voters and AKP and Erdogan. This distancing is engendered by the weakening of religion/Islam in the political and social identities, and it is ignited by the rising economic hurdles that are threatening the economic welfare and status of the conservative/Islamist middle class.

A survey¹⁴ conducted in November 2021 by Toplumsal Etki Arastirmalari Merkezi (TEAM) indicates that amongst religious voters in Konya, Kayseri, Yozgat, Sivas, Malatya, Elazığ, Bingöl, Erzurum, Gaziantep, Kocaeli and Istanbul, AKP is by far the first party with 47,5% . However, the AKP support in 2018 was 53%. Similar decrease is recorded for Recep Tayyip Erdogan since in 2018 74% of the religious voters voted for him, today only 62,2% would vote for him. Looking into more detail, in 2018 71,9% of the voters with middle level religiosity voted for Erdogan, while today only 59,8% of them would vote for him. Significant decrease is also recorded with the voters of high religiosity; 84,8% voted for Erdogan in 2018, while only 73,6% would vote for him today.

Apparently, the ongoing economic crisis has become a major source of discontent and of doubts within AKP voters. According to a survey conducted by Metropoll in October 2021, 61,4% of AKP voters think that the economy is badly managed, while in another survey conducted in December 2021, 36,5% of AKP voters said that they have less trust regarding the government's economic management and only 28,3% have more trust.

However, according to TEAM, the proportion of Turkish religious voters who are close to Erdogan is still very high, it reaches 76%. The distant ones are 14% and those who are not with him are only 10%. Although loyalty to Erdogan has waned, large masses still feel close to Erdogan. Those who are fully attached to, and admire, Erdogan are 20% and those who feel very close are 59% in total. While 16% consider themselves close to Erdogan, they are strongly critical.

It should be noted that “religious voters are not homogeneous in terms of their identities and values, as well as their tendencies» and they «seem to be divided into three groups in terms of their tendencies towards Erdogan and the AK Party: Those who say that they will be with Erdogan and the AK Party under any

¹⁴ http://www.teamarastirma.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/TEAMDindarSecmenler_Rapor.pdf

circumstances, those who are hesitant and complaining, and those who are detached or opposed. The largest of these three groups is those hesitant and complaining»¹⁵.

The “hesitant and complaining” are seen in different polls through the rising numbers of the undecided, which are emerging as the most decisive factor of the next elections in Turkey. According to the latest poll by Metropoll as of the time of writing¹⁶, the rate of all religious undecided voters, which was 17,9% in the January-March 2021 period, reached 28,4% in October-December 2021 while 22,9% of the voters who voted for AKP in the last elections are today undecided. The percentage of religious people who voted for AKP was at 73,8% in April-June 2021, 69,2% in the July-September period and 63,1% in the October-December period.

TEAM argues¹⁷ that a rapid deterioration in the economy may lead the hesitant part of the religious voters to quickly turn away from Erdogan and the People's Alliance and lead to a change in power. On the other hand, if Erdogan and the People's Alliance can change the course of the economy in the last period before the 2023 elections and remove the image of incompetent management, the possibility of religious voters to contribute to the change of power in 2023 may be considerably reduced.

However, despite the fact that economic conditions seem to be the most decisive factor regarding the conservative voters' distancing from AKP and Erdogan, it seems that under the surface lies a deeper disaffection that Islamism and its instrumentalization are not sufficient anymore to reverse.

Nevertheless, crucial questions do remain: Why are these conservative voters still undecided and not oriented towards the parties of the opposition? What are they afraid of? Is the opposition able to become sufficiently appealing and win their votes?

¹⁵ idem

¹⁶ <https://www.toplumsal.com.tr/gundem/anket-dindar-secmen-akp-den-kopuyor-dindar-genclik-h74139.html>

¹⁷ TEAM, idem