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## Report

# Towards The Third CHP: An Anatomy of the Main Opposition in Turkey

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Members of Turkey's main opposition Republican People's Party, CHP, walk to the Justice Ministry building in Ankara, Turkey, demanding that the ministry sends a summary of government bribery and corruption investigations to Parliament. (AP Photo/Burhan Ozbilici)

## Abstract

Presenting a brief history of the main opposition party in Turkey, this essay argues that the CHP had three major transformations in its history. Being the first, Atatürk's CHP was the state itself, incorporating the mainstream politics of left and right. Ecevit's CHP displaced the first, giving birth to a social democratic alternative in Turkey's politics. Kılıçdaroğlu's third CHP aims at aligning the organization and principles of the party to govern a complex and multicultural society in parallel with Western social democratic and political liberal ideals.

## Introduction

Republican People's Party (CHP) founded Turkey as a single party state where governors served as the party's local organization chiefs, making the party and the state almost synonymous. (1) Following Atatürk's death in 1938, İnönü assumed the party's leadership. His main objective was to maintain the integrity of the party state. In the beginning, CHP incorporated politicians from the left and to the right, from mild Islamist to hardliner racists and from rural landlords to urban nouveau riche. The party then represented a state coalition. The first CHP was the state itself. (2)

Following the Second World War this coalition collapsed, leading to the opening of Democratic Party, the DP. Led by former CHP member Menderes, the DP had two landslide victories in 1950 and 1954, marking the beginning of the end of the First CHP. Menderes had inherited the authoritarian political culture of CHP. His call for democratization turned into increasing authoritarianism. In 1957, Menderes' support declined, signaling to CHP and the army that popularity of the DP was in its historic low.

The Army used the pretext of anti-democratic measures of Menderes to organize a coup d'état against the DP and got rid of democracy all together. The junta closed down the DP and hanged Menderes on the eve of the global 1968. (3)

### The Second CHP

İnönü's CHP won the first elections following the coup in 1961. The rising call for socialism and democracy in the world was pushing the CHP into a new form of republican conservatism. A new center right party, the Justice Party (AP) were mobilizing the public dissent against the militarist and authoritarian leaning İnönü. CHP lost 1965 elections with a humiliating defeat, assuming once again the role of main opposition to the AP of Demirel. Four years later, İnönü got his last embarrassing election defeat.

The times they were a'changing. The 1968 had a great impact on Turkish politics. Students, workers, public employees were calling for a socialist revolution. The conservative İnönü leadership were deaf to these calls. Furthermore, İnönü did not oppose to the Army's open threats against democratic movements. When the 1971 military intervention came, İnönü chose to suppress the anti-militarist sentiments in the CHP.

The party's young general secretary, Bülent Ecevit disagreed. When the army asked the CHP to nominate politicians for the new illegitimate cabinet, Ecevit protested İnönü's willingness to accept the generals' demand. By resigning from his position, he signed the birth certificate of the second CHP.

In the fifth congress of CHP, İnönü challenged Ecevit's leftist and open social democratic opposition by threatening the delegates: "Either me or Bülent!" A vote of confidence gave the answer and İnönü resigned. Ecevit became the first leader in Turkey's politics who defeated a party leader by mobilizing intra-party opposition in 1972.

Adopting a social democratic ideology, the second CHP steered its ideological orientation away from the corporatism of the First. Ecevit called it the Left of Center. The Second

CHP won all the elections of 1970s, crowned its success in 1977 with the highest percentage of votes that CHP got in its history.

### **Towards the 1980 Coup**

CHP paid the price of swinging towards left by being persecuted in the hands of the junta that planned and made the 1980 coup. The party was banned, many of its members arrested and the entire social fabric of leftwing political organizations was destroyed.

In parallel with the US policy of containing Soviets with Islamism, the Junta entailed mobilizing a mixture of nationalism and Islam, an ideology they called Turkish Islam Synthesis. The attack on the left was so strong that the first public employee unions could not be opened for 15 years. It was the time for political Islam.

Erbakan's political Islamism and Fethullah Gülen's social Islamist Hizmet movement became the main winners of post-1980 Turkey. CHP, closed down by the military regime, was born in different names and constellation of groups such as SODEP, HP, SHP, DSP... Multiple incarnations of CHP was then brought together under SHP, DSP and CHP, whose total election performance again located the party as the main opposition in the first fifteen years after the coup.

1990's witnessed the rise of Necmettin Erbakan's political Islamist Welfare Party, the RP, a success that gave birth to a fundamental change in Turkish politics. The Army tried to counterbalance the rise of political Islam by threatening Islamists with military intervention and inviting CHP to its orbit. Aiming at closing down the RP in 1997, the generals once again intervened in Turkish politics and ousted a democratically elected government. This was going to be their last coup.

### **The Emergence of Neo-Islamism**

The February 28th military intervention, sometimes referred to as "the post-modern coup" pushed the Islamists temporarily away from the political center. Following the coup, the father of the second CHP, Ecevit joined two coalition governments until the next election in 1999.

In the mean time, the judiciary had closed down Erbakan's RP and banned him from politics for five years. The newly established Islamist party, The Virtue Party (the FP) incorporated the reformist Islamists, who demanded a change in hardliner Islamism conservatism of Erbakan.

In 2001, the Constitutional Court gave an unintentional support to the reformists by closing down the FP. The neo-Islamist generation led by Erdoğan and Gül, took the opportunity and in 2001 opened the Justice and Development Party, the AKP. (4)

### **Towards the Third CHP**

In the beginning, the AKP represented a new breath in Turkish politics, pushing all political parties and the Kemalist establishment to negative politics. As AKP campaigned for more democracy, pro-EU politics and economic welfare, the CHP under the nationalist Baykal, found itself in a position closer to the army and negative politics of telling the electorate what CHP would prevent AKP from doing.

CHP's conservative tone of accusatory politics did not convince voters. AKP won the two elections in 2002 and 2007 with a great success, giving Erdoğan a chance to form two consecutive governments with increasing public support. Baykal tried to stop Erdoğan by flirting with the army. As the neo-conservatism of Baykal failed, the CHP voters began to voice their concerns about Baykal's leadership.

Turkey is a parliamentary democracy run by political parties who operate on authoritarian presidential systems. Baykal's governance of the CHP drew on blocking all forms of dissent within the party, swinging the party more to right wing conservatism under the disguise of politics of secularism. Animating its militarist spirit, such a move pushed the CHP into a crisis of retrogression. The result was failure in the ballot box.

In 2010, a sex video tape scandal toppled Baykal for good. Much like AKP's opportunity to cede away from Erbakan as a result of military's closing of RP, CHP found an opportunity of change as a result of a measure that seemed to be against the party at the first sight.

### **Kılıçdaroğlu and the New CHP**

Becoming the chairman of CHP in 2010, Kılıçdaroğlu promised a fundamental change of course in the party's political practice. The CHP has two ideological wings. Nationalists and Social Democrats. Nationalists of Baykal pursue negative politics of what CHP should prevent AKP from doing. Social Democrats who cluster around Kılıçdaroğlu push the party for greater democratization.

In the first two years of his chairmanship, Kılıçdaroğlu's main mission was to bring the party together by bridging the gap between Nationalists and Social Democrats. AKP's

main strategy in those years was to make this gap wide enough to introduce a split in the party.

Managing to protect the integrity of the party required Kılıçdaroğlu to take a longer route to transform the party. Call for change paid back in the first general elections in 2011. Although CHP won 25% more chairs in the parliament from the previous election, Kılıçdaroğlu lost the election to Erdoğan who won a unquestionable victory.

In his first election Kılıçdaroğlu had run with a party organization that was crafted by Baykal. He was the new driver of the old car with a new steering wheel. It was time to renew the party itself.

First, he called for a party congress to change the dated party constitution. Introducing positive discrimination for women, the new CHP decided that %33 of all members of party administration should be women. Furthermore, the party decided on a 10% youth quota, making it easier for younger generation of CHP delegates to climb the leader of hierarchy in the party.

A few months later Kılıçdaroğlu organized the 34th party congress to further his reforms. Winning all of the 1164 votes made him the strongest chairman of the party since Ecevit.

His call for democracy paid back. Refusing to put together a "chairman's advisory list," a way to determine who the delegates should vote for the party assembly, he chose to let intra-party democracy work. Making sure to watch the nationalist and social democratic balance of ideology in the party, he chose to push for a slow change of course towards building the Third CHP.

### **A Real Test**

AKP presents CHP as an elitist party that is distant to the cultural values of Turkish middle and working classes. Furthermore, mobilizing a politics of victimization, AKP used CHP's support of the headscarf ban in public service to show that CHP was against religious symbols and practices.

It was true that many of CHP followers and members of the parliament had not been clear on headscarf. Nationalist MPs such as Nur Serter had prevented young women with headscarf from entering universities. CHP had been either against or vague on whether women with headscarf could be active in public service. Propagating for women's

increasing participation to social and public life while supporting to prevent women with headscarf to become MPs, presented a perfect dilemma for CHP.

In October 2013, Erdoğan had a chance to produce a perfect storm for CHP. Four members of the parliament from the AKP were about to return from Umrah visit from Saudi Arabia. Following a public relations campaign, these four women MPs who did not use the headscarf before, decided to put it on the same day before they join the session in the National Assembly.

A few MPs from the CHP voiced serious concerns, making Erdoğan happy that his plan would work. Yet it failed spectacularly. Kılıçdaroğlu and the new CHP did not object headscarf in the Assembly. When he was asked how he felt about MPs with headscarf, he just said "I am happy, very happy". Ironically, Mrs. Dalbudak, one for the four MPs who took the headscarf, was going to express her feelings the same way: "I am happy, very happy."

### **Towards The Third CHP**

Erdoğan's plan to introduce a headscarf crisis in the country helped the new CHP to prove its sincerity regarding change. Catching even staunch critiques of Kılıçdaroğlu with stunned disbelief, the new CHP proved that the party's transformation was not cosmetic but genuine. (5)

Two major moves then proved that CHP was on a course of great transformation on its way to the emergent Third CHP: Kılıçdaroğlu invited Sarıgül and Yavaş to be CHP candidates for İstanbul and Ankara municipalities. These enormously popular politicians were not even party members. Sarıgül had lost his membership because of his criticism of Baykal, Yavaş was a member of Nationalist Action Party, the MHP. This a pragmatic move aimed at being successful in the coming local elections that will take place on March 30, 2014.

If CHP proves to be successful in the upcoming election, it will be more likely for Kılıçdaroğlu to bring together another party congress to change the party assembly and the administration to get prepared for the coming presidential and parliamentary elections. Pragmatic, social democrat, pro-Eu and pro-Atlantic, in peace with the cultural religious universe of the country, the Third CHP may be the next governing party of the country.

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#### Endnotes

- (1) See A. Ayata (2010) 'Republican People's Party', Turkish Studies, Vol. 3 (1), pp. 102-121.
- (2) For more info see H. Bila (1999) CHP: 1919-1979 (Ankara: Doğan Kitap).
- (3) W Hale (1993) Turkish Politics and Military London: Routledge
- (4) For more info see U Cizre (ed.) Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey London: Routledge.
- (5) On headscarf controversy see A Bora and K Çalışkan (2008) What Is Under A Headscarf? Neo-Islamist vs. Kemalist Conservatism In Turkey, Arab Studies Journal, Vol. 15 (2), pp. 140-155.