

مركز البيدر للدراسات والتخطيط

Al-Baidar Center For Studies And Planning



Identity Conflict Is The Essence Of The Turkish Elections

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On the 100th anniversary of the founding of its republic, Turkey had witnessed one of its most important parliamentary elections. These elections, although they appear to be an economic livelihood, are in fact a struggle over identity between several parties. Whereas one party wants to keep Turkey secular and nationalistic, the other party seeks change.

With an overview of the distribution of seats in the Turkish House of Representatives in the 2023 elections -consisting of 600 parliamentary seats- the three-party People's Alliance won 323 seats (the Justice and Development Party AKP 268; the Nationalist Movement Party MHP 50; the New Welfare Party YRP 5). The Nation Alliance won 212 seats (the Republican People's Party CHP 169; the Nation Alliance İYİ 43), while the Labour & Freedom Alliance won 65 seats (Party of Greens and the Left Future YSGP 61; The Workers' Party of Turkey TİP 4).

These data reflect the intellectual, social, ideological and national orientation of the groups of the Turkish people, as 88% of those entitled to vote participated in the elections to choose the President of the Republic and the House of Representatives. If we look at the distribution of parliament, we notice the sharp social polarization within Turkish society.

According to the results announced by the Turkish Supreme Election Council, the AKP, one of the conservative centre-right parties, won 268 seats- representing 44.7% of the total vote. And if we add to it the proportion (0.8%) of the five seats of the votes for the Islamist New Welfare YRP, headed by Fatih Erbakan, the son of Necmettin Erbakan, then 45.5% of the total vote of the electorate supports the moderate Islamic approach to the future of Turkey.

And while it is not necessarily true that all AKP voters are from groups with an Islamic orientation, it can be said that all AKP and President Erdogan's voters are from the right-of-centre movement between Islamic and conservative groups. These voters are fully aware of President Erdogan's approach to changing the Turkish constitution, who seeks to add legislative laws that lean towards an Islamic and conservative nature.

Regarding the Republican People's Party, a centre-left party, it had won 169 parliamentary seats (thereby constituting 28.2% of the total vote). The Republican People's Party CHP, with their extremist secular ideology and their hostility to religion, immigrants, and refugees, represent the direction of their voters who reject the aspirations of President Erdogan and his conservative Islamic party.

The third category in Turkish society is the extreme nationalist right parties, represented

by the Nationalist Movement Party MHP and the Nation Alliance İYİ. Despite the division of the nationalist right into two parts, and the alliance of one part with President Erdogan and the other with the Republican people, the two sections have adopted common principles. However, they believe in a different method concerning the implementation mechanism, and this difference caused the split. The MPH won 50 seats, and with it the IYI won 43, making them constitute 15.5% of the total vote.

The fourth category of Turkish society are the voters of the YSGP Kurdish party and the Turkish extreme left, as their votes constituted 10.9% of the total vote. The Kurdish voters who voted for the YSGP Party of Greens and the Left Future, the heir to the Peoples' Democratic Party, accounted for 61 seats (10.2%), while TİP the Turkish extreme left formed 0.7%. It should be noted here that an unknown percentage of Kurdish voters voted for a non-YSGP.

In general, the votes of Turkish society can be distributed according to the political and social identity as follows:

The right-of-centre and the Islamic current (45.5%).

The left of secular centre (28.1%).

The ultra-nationalist Turkish right (15.5%).

The Turkish extreme left (0.7%).

The Kurdish left (10.2%).

Here we are talking about popular currents that adopt political, social and ideological visions represented by the parties in the Turkish Parliament. Each of these four groups, from the right and the left, have different approaches to managing state affairs internally and externally. And when we discuss the views held by the Turkish right and left, we are talking about four fundamental matters. They are the popular positions on religion and secularism, then the positions on the Kurdish issue, minorities, immigrants and refugees, and lastly the positions on how international relations should be upheld.

For example, the centre-right represented by the AKP, seeks to adopt a cultural identity consisting of Turkish nationalism mixed with the Sufi Hanafi school of thought. This party seeks to distance itself from Western social traditions, anti-social secularism, the most prominent of which is homosexuality, and supporting the veil movement along with moderate social Islamic culture.

Concerning the Kurdish issue, the centre-right pursues to contain Kurdish demands. This

includes their demands for autonomy, along with intellectual and cultural freedom. The centre-right seeks to replace Kurdish demands with a moderate conservative approach under the tent of Turkish nationalism and works to improve the living conditions of the Kurdish areas.

Regarding the refugee and immigrant crisis, the centre-right believes that dialogue with international actors and the deportation of refugees by peaceful means is the best way to solve the prevailing conundrum. Concerning foreign policy, rapprochement with Western and European countries is ideal and would be upheld, provided that Turkey does not make concessions at the expense of its conservative, national, and cultural principles. Furthermore, maintaining an openness to the East and to Muslim countries culturally, economically, and politically is essential.

The Turkish extreme right, represented by the Nationalist Movement Party MHP and the Nation Alliance [YI], also want to preserve the Turkish national identity. Their ideology is a Turkish identity mixed with moderate secularism and a respect for faith, with nationalism taking precedence over religion. They do not take a strict stance against the veil, while it does take strict stances against homosexuality despite its adoption of secularism.

The Islamic religion, according to the view of the Turkish extreme right, is the Sufi Hanafi school. Furthermore, the Turkish right are suspicious of the Alawite and Shiite Turkish minorities with regards to their loyalty to Turkey, like how they are doubtful of the Kurds. A large current of the centre-right shares this view. The extreme right uses discrimination and racist ideas to protect the Turkish identity, which it believes is threatened by the culture of religious and ethnic minorities, resident foreigners, and refugees. However, they do welcome refugees from Turkic-speaking countries such as Central Asia or Turkish minorities in neighbouring countries.

In dealing with the Kurdish issue inside Turkey, the extreme right considers Kurdish demands a threat to Turkish national security and refuses to grant any political and cultural rights to the Kurds. They call for containing the Kurds as “Turkish” citizens, and using violence to confront them if necessary is acceptable. As for the issue of international relations, the far right opposes rapprochement with the European Union and describes the United States and European countries as imperialists that seek to destroy Turkey.

On the other side, the centre-left current represented in the House of Representatives by the Republican People’s Party, which began its political life at the beginning of the last century

as a secular nationalist party, and then ended in the political path that adopted the identity of Kemalist ideas, sees itself as the heir to the values of the Republic and secularism. The centre-left believes that Turkish identity should be preserved through extreme secularism. They believe in following Western social traditions and banning any manifestation of religion in the state and society, such as the veil in state institutions and universities.

Although members of the People's Republic Party CHP abandoned some of their principles regarding the hijab in their recent election campaign and showed respect for religion, masses of the conservative centre-right and the Islamic movement considered it as an un-real movement. Perhaps the two most important issues in the dispute between the right and the left are the questions surrounding the hijab and LGBT rights. While the centre-left believe that the LGBT community deserves recognition and rights, they do not regard the veil as a personal choice, but rather as a manifestation of religion. The centre-left hold the view that Turkey should imitate France in banning conspicuous religious symbols in state institutions and universities.

Concerning their positions on the Kurdish issue and the Alawites, the centre-left and extremist-left believe that the Turkish state should grant the Kurds political and cultural autonomy and recognize the Kurds as a second nationality in Turkey. In this context, Kurdish and Alevi voters voted for the centre-left presidential candidate Kemal Kilicdaroglu. This angered the centre-right and extremist-right masses. Some of their political representatives declared that the centre-left leaders would pose as a threat to Turkish national security if they represented the Turkish people.

As for the issue of refugees and immigrants, the centre-left adopted very hostile extremist views. This is not due to the fear of a secular Turkish identity being influenced by foreign culture, but rather due to the economic crisis and the social structural effects that resulted from the presence of millions of refugees and foreign residents. In foreign policy, the centre-left believes that Turkey should return to the era of Kemalism in maintaining relations only with the West and isolating itself from the East and Muslim countries.

Social polarization in Turkey is not new. During the past century, Turkey witnessed a sharp polarization at the end of the 1950s between the centre-right represented by the Democratic Party and the secular nationalists led by the Republican People's Party. This ended in a military coup in 1960. Then, at the end of the 1970s, Turkey witnessed another social polariza-

tion between the right and the left, which also ended with a military coup in 1980. Since the first elections after 1980, centre-right parties have dominated the power of Turkish institutions, and the centre-left has withdrawn itself into the strong opposition.

And if the right gains votes from more than 60% of the Turkish people, the left, which will have votes constituting less than 30%, will not surrender easily, taking advantage of the atmosphere of democracy and Western support.

About center

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