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## **Populism and Democracy in Turkey: The Case of the Republican People's Party**

### ***Türkiye'de Popülizm ve Demokrasi: Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi Örneği***

#### **Abstract**

This study will examine the main opposition party in Turkey, the Republican People's Party (CHP) and discusses the constitutive role of populism in the party's discourse. Therefore, this study will highlight and compare the major cornerstones of the CHP's populist discourse and its current manifestation. For this purpose, after some opening remarks about the literature on populism in Turkey in Turkey, this article will move on to analyze the three historical periods that have shaped the party's populist appeal: the single-party era of 1923–1946; the 1970s, which saw the rise of left-populism in the party; and the social-democratic opening in the late 1980s under the name of, first, the Social Democratic Party (SODEP) and subsequently the Social Democratic Populist Party (SHP). The final section will provide an analysis of the party's current performance and its discourse on contemporary Turkish political issues, to offer a critical debate on the continuity and ruptures within the CHP's populist discourse and the potential for left-populism in Turkish politics.

#### **Öz**

Bu çalışma, ana muhalefet partisi olan Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi'nin (CHP) söyleminde kurucu rol oynayan popülizm temasını ele almaktadır. Bu amaçla ilk olarak CHP'nin popülist söyleminin tarihsel gelişiminin önemli aşamaları ve şu andaki performansı incelenmektedir. Bu çerçevede, Türkiye'de popülizm literatürüne dair başlangıç tespitlerinden sonra, CHP'nin popülist söyleminin tarihsel uğrakları tek partili dönem (1923-1946), sol-popülizmin hakim olduğu 1970'ler ve 1980'lerin ortasında Sosyal Demokrat Parti (SODEP) ve sonlarında Sosyal Demokrat Halk Partisi (SHP) performansı çerçevesinde haritalandırılıyor. Sonrasında ise partinin mevcut performansı ve Türkiye'nin güncel meseleleri üzerine geliştirdiği yaklaşımlar ele alınarak, partinin popülist söyleminde demokratik sol-popülizmin imkanları ve sınırları üzerine bir tartışma yapılıyor.

#### **Keywords**

Populism, the Republican People's Party, left-populism, social democracy, Turkey

#### **Anahtar Kelimeler**

Popülizm, Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, sosyal demokrasi, sol-popülizm, Türkiye

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## Populism in Turkish Studies: A Puzzled Debate

Populism is a subject that causes considerable debate among contemporary social scientists.<sup>1</sup> However, the topic has been discussed in Turkey since the founding of the Republic and scholars of Turkish politics would easily agree that, when the strategies and discourses of all the different parties from across the political spectrum are considered, populism has been one of the most important constitutive elements of political life in Turkey. However, although there is a vast literature on the origins and current performance of right-wing populism in Turkey, studies of left-populism are comparatively few in number.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, even in studies that ostensibly compare left and right populism in Turkey, the focus is far less on the left-wing variant that invariably recedes in such studies.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is to fill this gap in the literature that this study aims to analyze the populist discourse of the main Turkish opposition party and to draw attention to the prospects and limitations of left-wing populism in Turkey.

From the analyses of the early republican period to the debates that ensued after the post-war transition to democracy in Turkey, populism has been instrumentalized as an all-encompassing term to refer to political, economic, and cultural policies and discourses. The aim of this article is not to narrate such different uses of the term in the literature on Turkish politics, however some brief remarks on the problematic character of these uses will be helpful in realizing this article's aims. The first problematic that needs to be addressed is the analytical use of populism to prove how Turkey has deviated from the norms of the Western context. Beginning with the presumption that Western polities have been shaped by advanced forms of economic development and the processes of democratization, such approaches explain the power of populism in Turkish politics as stemming from the relative backwardness of such political-economic developments. Thus, the analysis of the populism of the single-party era with its solidaristic and corporatist features aiming to transcend class antagonisms in Turkey; or analyses of the emergence of a "supra-class strategy," or inter-class coalition, in the multi-party era initiated by the Democrat Party (Kasaba, 1993; Keyder, 2003); or a general narrative of democracy in Turkey as the struggle between state elites and political elites, all attempt to frame and contextualize the peculiarity of Turkish populism. These analyses also often refer to the features of Turkish democracy, which is generally analyzed as a struggle between rational and populist democracy (Heper, 1990). Generally speaking, an emphasis on the "peculiarity of the Turkish case" or on the deviancy of Turkey from the Western course obstructs the comparative analysis of populism.

Similarly, the use of the term populism in the literature focusing on a center-periphery cleavage also reproduces problematic dichotomies in the analysis of Turkish politics. Mardin's center versus periphery (Mardin, 1973) approach rests on the assumption that the political life of Turkey is shaped by the struggle between a populist-traditional-religious camp and its bureaucratic-modernist-secularist-elitist opponents. Such an assumed dichotomy between the secular state and a religious periphery is viewed as the fertile soil of the right-wing populist

discourse, claiming to represent “real national values,” that was started by the Democrat Party of Menderes, followed by the Justice Party of Demirel, the Motherland Party of Özal, and the Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party.<sup>4</sup> Third, populism is generally analyzed solely through reference to its cultural or economic features, rather than through a systematic analysis of the political, economic, and cultural facets of policy-making and discourse setting. It is quite difficult to argue that populism is either solely a reflection of the economic system, class interests, or class struggle (Keyder 1987), or that it is only about a so-called cultural cleavage between the center and the periphery. Furthermore, it should be noted that approaches that frame populism as a relationship between patron and client (Kalaycıoğlu, 2001) reproduce such problems and so contribute to the peculiarity and deviancy theses. Lastly, some scholars go beyond the well-known duality which juxtaposes a populist center-right to a bureaucratic center-left (Erdoğan, 1998) and some others argue that the use of the term populism cannot aid an understanding of the complexity of social relations in Turkey (Yalman, 1985).

These problematic and complex uses of the term populism<sup>5</sup> give rise to the question of whether populism offers any explanatory power for understanding differences between political strategies and discourses in Turkey, or other socio-cultural and political-economic settings. Rather than conceptualizing populism as an ideology (Mudde, 2017) or strategy (Weyland, 2001), populism is here understood more as a political appeal that is not limited to ideas and programs (Ostiguy, 2017). For Ostiguy, populism as an ordinal category offers a two-dimensional space, anchored in cross-regional notions of the left and right. Such an understanding of populism, it is argued in this paper can: assist in differentiating populism from anti-populism in Turkey, can help scholars of Turkish politics to investigate the differences between left and right populism, and can help to overcome the limited explanatory power of the center-periphery divide thesis. On this point, it should also be noted that it is not only Ostiguy that focuses on the political realm (strategies, discourses, and the styles of the parties and their leaders), while largely ignoring the importance of economic factors in the operationalization of populist discourse, since other scholars of populism such as Laclau, Mudde, and Weyland do likewise. Thus, this paper will also offer an additional factor to understand the dynamics of populism in Turkey, namely the role of economic processes or strategies in the reproduction of material interests.

The focus of this study is an analysis of the prospects of a democratic left populism in the main opposition party in Turkey and here the term populism is neither conceptualized as being necessarily implying pejorative (Laclau, 2007) nor as being bad for democracy and diversity. It is analyzed as a set of varied political appeals (Ostiguy, 2017) and as a necessary moment for the construction of a kind of collective subject, a new “people,” for the continuation of the existing order based on political-economic inequalities or for its counter-hegemonic dissolution (Mouffe, 2018). Thus, the role of economic factors as well as interests will be particularly discussed.

## Populism and the CHP: Three Historical Moments (The 1930s, 1970s, and 1990s)

Turkish populism was formulated through the Six Arrow (*Altı Ok*) principles of the Republican People's Party during the single-party era. This populism of the early republican years, functioning as a political strategy to reject class politics, was defined within the ideals of a homogenized national identity and interests. It was solidified in the views of Recep Peker, the General Secretary of the party between 1931 and 1936,<sup>6</sup> as being characterized by solidarist and corporatist features making an appeal that included a rejection of classes as the sole vehicles of political-economic interests and their replacement by groupings defined by occupation (Dumont, 1984) which could work, beyond the narrowness of class interests, for the national good. However, as was particularly noticeable in the debates around land reform in the 1930s and 40s, diverse class interests have always been an important factor shaping political processes and have stood in stark relief against such ideas of the creation of a national-popular bloc, against privileges, and for a classless and homogenous social formation (Karaömerlioğlu, 2006). The assertive secularist policy<sup>7</sup> that dominated the early republican years (at least until 1947) along with the economic problems of the era (particularly after the Great Depression in 1929 and during the Second World War) also posed important challenges to the success of such populist appeals of the party in the 1930s and 1940s.

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Therefore, this version of populism largely failed as a general strategy to contain the peasantry or rural masses during the 1930s and 1940s. This outcome being further hindered by the inability of the state to develop the communication and transport infrastructure needed to transmit the messages of the ruling elites (Brockett, 2011). Moreover, the expansive populist strategy of the Democrat Party, (Sunar, 2008, & 1965) positing the party as the genuine representative of society's values and maintaining that it would not follow the state elites of the single-party era and "impose" reforms which were not welcomed by the "people," proved to be effective. The DP's famous slogan: "Enough! It is the people's turn to speak (Yeter! Söz Milletindir)" clearly underlines this strategy in challenging the limits of Kemalist populism.

This has led some scholars to define the populism of the single-party era as "intellectual populism" (Toprak, 1992), which is thus contrasted to a "political populism" and speaks to a dissonance between the elites and the real-life experiences and perceptions of society. Thus, it could be argued that the populism of the era, with its corporatist and solidarist tones, was a particular strategy to contain the reactions of the masses and eliminate the development of class struggles (Dumont, 1984),<sup>8</sup> as well as reproducing the cultural and political power of the ruling elites. In other words it functioned similarly to statism in the economic realm and secularism in the cultural field.

In the analysis of the populist appeal of the state-building CHP, it is necessary to focus on the "left of the center" discursive shift of the party in the mid-1960s under its secretary, and later (from May 1972) its leader, Bülent Ecevit.<sup>9</sup> As a result of the changing socio-economic

and constitutional structure of Turkey, Ecevit maintained that it was important to reformulate the Kemalist notion of populism (“halkçılık”). To contextualize such shifts in the discourse of the CHP, it is useful to note the impact of the much more liberal and democratic constitution of 1961 which extended political rights and the unionization and collective bargaining rights of workers resulting in higher real wages by the end of the 1960s. This, along with the accelerated mass migration to big cities in the 1960s and the associated rapid industrialization led to the rise of the working-class politics (Kili, 1980).

The formation of new political organizations (such as the Turkish Workers’ Party, TİP, and a revolutionary labor confederation, DİSK) was a natural outcome of these processes. Moreover, although there was a significant rise in GDP by the mid-1960s, problems of the distribution of incomes and the impact of rapid urbanization would produce tensions particularly for the new urban classes. As a result, a modification within the discourse of the party or its appeal to the new urban poor was considered vital to compete with the right-wing populism of Süleyman Demirel’s Justice Party. As Boratav (1983) has argued, between 1962 and 1976 populism was the dominant political paradigm and was seen in the execution of the import-substitution industrialization strategy, the incoherent employment regime, higher real wages for workers, and the expansion of state credits and incentives for agricultural producers. Thus, populism was also a main point of struggle between center-right and center-left political groupings.

As the general secretary of the party Bülent Ecevit introduced the Left of the Center (*Ortanın Solu*)<sup>10</sup> discourse to the party, making such a shift would mean that the party would leave its traditional statist and anti-class discourse and lean towards social democratic ideals. This shift in the party’s discourse, which was also supported by the party’s leader, İsmet İnönü, could be considered as a political strategy to represent the rising egalitarian demands within society and played a crucial role in balancing the power of the Justice Party in the mid-1960s, promising industrialization and economic development. An additional driver of such a shift was the political rise of the TİP as a competing actor calling workers, intellectuals, and university students to come together to campaign for a greater egalitarianism,<sup>11</sup> encapsulated in its call for “Köylüye Toprak, Herkese İş” (jobs for everyone, land for peasants) (Ünsal, 2002).

Ecevit’s increasing focus on a fairer distribution of incomes, one of the most important features of left populism, and an elimination of anti-egalitarian practices in the semi-feudal rural areas and among urban working classes would be much more visible after the March 12, 1971 coup and when he became the new leader of the party in 1972. Ecevit’s call for a change in the socio-economic order and his criticisms of the traditional elitist and bureaucratic tendencies in the party’s organization marked a new phase in the history of the party and its populist appeal and changed its content. His juxtaposition of ‘the people’, meaning the oppressed workers, small peasantry, and small artisans, with those “who do not represent people,” the usurers, large landowners, monopolist fractions of capital, compradors, and the non-productive sectors of the society, was a call for the party to champion the people as they faced

real material problems.<sup>12</sup> As Erdoğan (1998) argued, Ecevit's discourse saw the people as the representatives of higher moral values such as solidarity, egalitarianism, participation, and democracy, which are considered as inherent in Turkish society. By doing so, Ecevit was actually re-inventing the category of the 'people' by reshaping and reconstructing it. Ecevit, like many populist leaders, also attempted to adapt himself to the lifestyle of the average Turkish citizen, by wearing a blue shirt and cap. Moreover, for Ecevit, there was no contradiction between religious conservatism and progressiveness. His moderate approach to the place of religion in Turkish life and his capacity to frame public debates by highlighting socio-economic problems, rather than the eternal dichotomy of secularism and religiosity, were some of his achievements as a populist leader.

In Ecevit's thinking politics was for the people, it could be only learned in and with the people through communal activity. While it could be argued that Ecevit's appeal to populism was a political strategy to contain the left and its supporters within the boundaries of the political-economic system, and although there were also criticisms of his return to statism rather than continuing on a populist trajectory, the importance of such a shift in discourse in the history of the CHP cannot be ignored when it is viewed against the backdrop of the party's statist and bureaucratic tradition. The electoral successes of the party in 1973 and particularly in 1977, where it won 33 percent and 41 percent respectively and obtained an 8% increase in votes in four years, was a result of this strategy and would not be replicated in subsequent elections. The legacy of the Ecevit of the 1970s not only represents an interesting case in the history of Turkish populism but it also sheds light on the debates of the future direction of the party, which has been widely discussed over the last two decades when the political terrain has been held by the populism of the ruling party.

A similar experience, albeit one with a social-democrat character, but also touching upon a democratic solution of the Kurdish question could be seen in the case of SODEP and its successor the Social Democratic Populist Party (SHP). The SHP was founded in 1985, following the closure of the CHP by the military after the 1980 coup, and gained popularity in the 1987 general elections. Standing against the neoliberal and conservative populism of Özal's ruling Motherland Party in the 1980s (Öniş, 2004), the SHP adopted social democratic values with a populist discourse to target Turkish economic problems with the slogan of "no to being squeezed like a lemon" during the 1987 elections (Ciddi 2009, p.79; Wuthrich, 2018, p.50). Moreover, the traditionally dominant Kemalist nationalism and secularism, the so-called "red-lines" of the party's tradition, were softened in the party's discourse to bring success in the 1989 elections when the party won control of the three major municipalities in Turkey (İstanbul, Ankara, and İzmir). Later in the 1991 general elections, in coalition with the pro-Kurdish HEP, the SHP would come second, behind Süleyman Demirel's True Path Party which had fought an interesting populist campaign based on a series of promises, most notable one pledging "two keys for everyone (one for a house and one for a car)." The mobilization of the urban poor and lower middle classes achieved by the SHP was remarkable and all the

more so since it had been achieved when such groups had been hit by the worsening economic conditions of the 1990s.

The populist appeal of the SHP particularly attracted the urban working classes whose economic position was badly damaged as a result of Özal's anti-labor policies and who had organized massive protests known as Bahar Eylemleri (Spring Protests). However, the electoral alliance of the SHP with the pro-Kurdish HEP would raise tensions within the veto powers in the Turkish political system (such as the National Security Board and Constitutional Court) and a large-scale campaign to denigrate the party emerged. Moreover, cases of corruption within the municipalities headed by the SHP would also lose the party support (from 36% in 1989 to 20% in 1994). The political vacuum left by the elimination of the SHP would be later filled by the Necmettin Erbakan's Islamist Welfare Party in the mid-1990s, which campaigned in the 1994 local and the 1995 general elections to mobilize the urban poor impacted by the economic crisis (Öniş, 1997; White, 2002; & Atasoy, 2009).

The CHP was reestablished again by 1995 after legal changes in the parliament allowed parties that had been closed by the 1980-83 military regime to reopen, and the SHP and CHP would unite under its umbrella. However, the left-populist appeals of the party proved to have been a short-lived phenomena and the statist-nationalist-securitist tradition regained traction within the party (Bora 2007), particularly during Deniz Baykal's leadership. As Emre (2015, 399) has argued, in the 1990s, the left populism of center-left political actors was replaced by an identity politics that prioritized Turkish nationalism and secularism against the rise of Kurdish nationalism and Islamism with the result that almost nothing remained from the democratic left-populist appeal.

### **Populism in Opposition: The CHP from 2002**

Looking at the main opposition party, it is possible to observe a level of continuity in its traditionally statist and bureaucratic discourse in opposition to the ruling power of the AKP since 2002. However, this does not tell the whole story since from Baykal (2002-2010) to Kılıçdaroğlu (2010-date) and during the campaign of Muharrem İnce, there has emerged a tendency within the party's discourse to reference the populist themes articulated in the 1970s. One of the most important strategies of the AKP had been to typecast the main opposition party in the statist tradition and to place itself as the humble representative of the values of society and "servant" of the nation in a much more expansionist rhetoric. Through the use of the "service to the nation" device (Küçük-Özselçuk, 2015; Türk, 2018), the ruling party claims that the state-building elites, and their current representative the CHP, have always been elitist, bureaucratic, and alien to the "actual" values of society. Therefore, the struggle of the ruling party is presented as a struggle against this tradition. Indeed, during the main opposition period from 2002, it is quite difficult to argue that the CHP could challenge the hegemonic discourse of the AKP and posit a more all-embracing political discourse to bring the state and the nation together.

Nevertheless, it is possible to observe certain populist appeals in the discourse of the main opposition party, during the post-2010 Kılıçdaroğlu period and particularly during the presidential candidacy of Muharrem İnce. Although such populist appeals of the opposition party are not made with anything like the consistency of those of Turkey's ruling party, one might argue that, unlike Deniz Baykal's leadership period, after 2010 Kılıçdaroğlu made populist appeals focusing on the actual material problems of society such as chronic unemployment, corruption, poverty, and the precarious conditions of labor. But it is still quite difficult to argue that the opposition party developed democratic left-populist appeals to replace the secularist and Kemalist nationalist themes of the Baykal period.

The ideological red lines of the party, such as Kemalist nationalism and assertive secularism, still obstructs to develop an alternative roadmap to the solution of the ethnic and religious identity issues. Kılıçdaroğlu's total rejection of politics touching upon ethnic and religious sectarianism need to be considered as part of this framework. Therefore, it was difficult for the opposition party to form a Gramscian national-popular bloc of different social groups including classes and identity-based groups. Thus, the party leadership have been content to reproduce their power without challenging the party's red lines and there are strong proponents, within both the party and its social base,<sup>13</sup> of prioritizing territorial integrity, Kemalist nationalism, and an assertive form of secularism. Its support for the continuation of the ban on the headscarf in the 1990s and the party's current liberal position on this issue could be seen as an important development of Kılıçdaroğlu era. However, from a broader perspective, it also shows the party's limited capacity to transform or determine the political agenda and move beyond the lines of Kemalism nationalism, secularism, and debates on identity issues to address the actual material problems of the urban and rural poor.

It is widely acknowledged that one of the most important sources of the success for the ruling party has been its ability to criticize the existing order through a hegemonic counter-discourse (Yalman, 2009). Although it is now logically impossible to posit the AKP as an outsider, it is still the case that the ruling party presents the CHP as the representative of the center and itself as the voice of those people "excluded" since the foundation of the Republic. As Açıkel (1996) has noted, the AKP can successfully mobilize the masses through a discursive strategy of "holy suppressedness." With the ruling party strategically voicing a dichotomy between the "ballot box" and the "tutelage" in each election and reducing democracy to a fight with the "Kemalist tutelage," the CHP's red lines remove opportunities for a hegemonic political strategy, play into the hands of the AKP, and so have been one of the most important sources of its electoral defeats.

Similar to the developments of a partly liberalized stance on secularism in the CHP of the Kılıçdaroğlu period, the party's increasing focus on the question of a fair distribution of welfare could also be considered as an important development for a populist appeal, although one that has clear limitations. During the early years of the government of the ruling party, the main opposition party, particularly under Baykal's leadership in the local elections of



2009, pursued a problematic approach of criticizing the social aid mechanisms and helping the poor strategy of the ruling party to attract votes from urban poor particularly. However, this highly debatable and elitist approach was changed significantly under the leadership of Kılıçdaroğlu, who underlined the need for more social aid and fairer income distribution. The main opposition party's proposal for the introduction of Family Insurance (2011, *Aile Sigortası*), suggesting monthly support for the poorest sections of society, and an increasing focus on the precarious conditions of retired people (currently exceeding 12 million people, or almost 15% of the population), are clear examples of such a strategy. However, there remains an ambiguity in CHP discourse as it tries to forward an alternative economic model that calls for an alliance of the excluded poor masses and the middle-classes in Turkey.

During the AKP era there have been conservative populist family policies and an increasing volume of social security (Yılmaz, 2015) characterized by populist interventions in the fields of education and health such as the General Insurance of Health scheme (*Genel Sağlık Sigortası, GSS*) that actually target the privatization and marketization of basic social services. The political reality here is that these have made it difficult for the main opposition party to challenge the hegemonic discourse of the ruling party without suggesting an alternative model which would necessitate a systemic change in the welfare state in general and social security system in particular. Over the last decade the opposition party has made numerous partial suggestions for changes to social services that have all been dismissed as “empty promises” during election debates with the ruling party's leader. Thus, there is a need for the main opposition party to develop and deploy a more insistent and systematic political strategy with the capacity to challenge the populist discourse of the ruling party on socio-economic inequalities. Indeed this is all the more important given that the country could well descend into crisis due to financial imbalances in the Turkish economy.

Although it did not increase the number of votes cast for the main opposition party,<sup>14</sup> the campaign during the June 7, 2015 general election seemed to hold out such a prospect since socio-economic issues and promises were more prominent in the discourse of the CHP during this campaign. Here the party called for solutions to the problems of poverty, sub-contracted workers, workers on average wages, tenants, small and mid-scale enterprises, as well as for social programs for the disadvantaged sections of the society such as women, youth, the disabled, and the elderly. However, as discussed, in addition to socio-economic proposals, rather than reproducing traditional Kemalist nationalism and statist discourse, the inclusion of identity issues and the promotion of a more embracing discourse for the creation of a national-popular bloc are also necessary for electoral success. This would also hem in and pin down the AKP's discursive strategy of continuously criticizing the ideological tradition of the main opposition party. Obviously, such an opening of the main opposition party is difficult in the light of the power of such traditions within the party and its electoral base, and is all the more difficult given the appropriation of national security discourse by the ruling party in coalition with the another opposition party, the MHP, after the failed coup of July 2016.

## The Prospects of Left-Populism in the CHP: Revitalization of the 1970s?

The main opposition party chose Muharrem İnce, a former deputy of Yalova, known for his social-democratic and conservative identity as its candidate for the June 24, 2018 presidential election. His use of populist themes during the electoral campaign<sup>15</sup> was explained as coming from the necessity to appeal to sections of society that were known for their conservatism. In other words, this choice was considered to be a requirement to expand the social base of the party and so garner electoral success. This rhetorical drift was criticized by some scholars who argued that the hegemony of a conservative electorate is a myth rather than reality (Demirkent, 2018) and that Muharrem İnce's candidacy should therefore be considered as a jettisoning of the necessity to form a national-popular bloc based on the principles of equality, freedom, and cultural diversity and highlighting the absence of an alternative political vision for the CHP.<sup>16</sup> Such criticisms were not, moreover, confined to academic circles for similar points were made by the former presidential candidate Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, who was the Secretary-General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation between 2004 and 2014.

Muharrem İnce's populist appeal also led to a discussion that underlines its similarities with the 1970s left-populist tradition.<sup>17</sup> Although it is debatable whether İnce had the imagination to create his own "people" or possessed the political capacity to structure a national-popular bloc along the lines of Ecevit's, it is possible to observe an, albeit inconsistent, tendency for a more populist thread within the party's discourse running from Baykal to Kılıçdaroğlu and from them to İnce. During the electoral campaign, İnce called himself a "poor Muharrem of you (the people)." His performance of baling straw in Ceyhan (a district in Adana) and noting that "he is also a son of a farmer" ("biz çiftçi çocuğuyuz"), or wearing a peaked cap (a *kasket*, like Ecevit), and riding a bicycle to his platforms were all signs of a populist attempt to equate himself with the "people." Building on these signs, he described the Presidential Palace as the center of elitism, labeled Erdoğan the "White Turk" and "the real elitist" who consumed luxury "white tea" in his presidential palace, and styled himself as a "black" (Milliyet, 2018)<sup>18</sup> insisting that he would continue to live in his flat were he elected. At a meeting in Rize he furthered this populist appeal (Hürriyet, 2018)<sup>19</sup> by juxtaposing the corrupted elites with the poor people and promised that "I will not get rich unless you do too" (Evrensel, 2018).<sup>20</sup>

His strategy of underlining his conservative background in every speech was an attempt to equate himself with a large section of the people. Arguing in a similar vein to Ecevit, İnce also maintained that there was not necessarily a contradiction between supporting democratic and progressive ideas and upholding religious morals and so spoke to a modernity that was recognizably not alien to the traditions of its own society. Although Ecevit never defined himself by a conservative background, İnce's populist call to the people that he shared their values can be seen as his buying into what Demirkent (2018) calls the "conservative electorate myth". This strategy was underlined when, while criticizing unfair practices against the Alevis in Turkey, he began by saying "we Sunnis".<sup>21</sup> These remarks are the context of a rising pop-

ulist tendency in the discourse of the main opposition party, which with a possible leadership of İnce could become yet more visible in the future.

Thus, there is a need to analyze the prospects for a left-populism in Turkey and in the CHP with a particular focus on the performance of İnce (Aydın, 2018, Öz 2018).<sup>22</sup> First, and with the caveat that it is too early to fully analyze İnce's left-populism, it can be argued that İnce's performance and appeals represent inconsistencies for the prospects of a left-populism. This is particularly the case in his failure to produce a systematic roadmap to solve economic inequalities in Turkey. Thus, during the electoral campaign for the presidency, İnce did not provide a clear alternative economic program based on the ideals of economic redistribution. In fact by repeatedly emphasizing how his technocratic team had expertise in economic issues, he fell to the trap of approaching the economy as a technical issue<sup>23</sup> and so campaigned on the terrain mapped out by the neo-liberal hegemonic ideology. Moreover, as seen in his meetings with business associations during the campaign,<sup>24</sup> his focus on the necessity to attract foreign investors for economic development and his underlining of the importance of political stability as one of the most important prerequisites of this saw him deploying another form of economic developmentalist discourse. These issues caused a certain confusion about the content of the economic program of a left-populist leader and such confusion was compounded by the question of whether İnce's economic program differed from the party's populist history which, of course, includes statism and an anti-class political discourse in the 1930s.

These are not the only challenges facing the formation of the national-popular bloc or Turkish left-populism since there is also an absence of a proposal to solve the Kurdish question in Turkey and a lack of analysis of conservative gains during the AKP era. Moreover, İnce's systematic criticisms of the presence of Syrian migrants in Turkey, though tapping into a popular well of debate within the society, also touches on the discourse mobilized recently by neo-fascist parties in Europe. Additionally, as noted particularly by Selahattin Demirtaş the candidate of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party, İnce shows little enthusiasm for the promotion and development of a participatory democracy that would include different segments of society. Thus, in this context İnce's performance betrays a fundamental ambiguity over the prospects for a reassertion of the centralized leadership that has historically been an important feature of the Turkish political party system. In all of this it should also be noted that similar debates, around the issues of centralized leadership and an economic platform capable of challenging the rule of financialization, also dog many left-populist parties in Europe.<sup>25</sup>

Although İnce partly blurred them, it is still too early to argue that the party's traditional red lines have disappeared either within the leadership or within the ranks of its social base. However, İnce's performance marks the beginning of a fruitful debate about the main opposition party's prospects, its future rhetorical direction, as well as the constitution of a left-populist moment capable of challenging the power of the right-populism of the ruling party. Indeed, in the midst of the deep economic crisis in Turkey as seen in the recent rise of inflation and

unemployment along with imbalances in the financial system and foreign exchange parity, one might anticipate such left-populism as a counter-hegemonic moment to appear in Turkey.

At this point it is important to consider the main opposition's success in the local elections of 2019.<sup>26</sup> During the March 2019 local election campaign, the ruling party's leaders aimed to mobilize the masses by fueling polarization through claiming that the candidates of the main opposition party were allied with terrorists and cooperating with foreign agents (Wuthrich and Ingleby, 2020, p.26). However, on this occasion the main opposition party did not react by selecting a candidate who combatted such polarization with a similarly combative and aggressive tone. Candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu's campaign echoed to the idea and motto of the politics of "Radical Love" (CHP, 2019).<sup>27</sup> The strategy was mainly based on the ideas of the author Ateş İlyas Başsoy, who states: "Ignore them, love their lovers" (Tokyay, 2019),<sup>28</sup> and who warns against the dangers of political polarization cautioning: "Don't get divided into camps!" (CHP, 2019). Underlining the importance of social media outlets in the campaign and emphasizing the role of the emotions through a duality of fear and love, this strategy suggests a focus on bread and butter issues, rather than participating in the other political debates the dominate domestic politics and so adding yet another brick to the walls of polarization. The campaign manual, *Radical Love*, highlights the fact that the real divide is neither between secularism and Islam nor between Turks and Kurds, but rather between the rich and poor. During the election campaign, it was also notable that İmamoğlu attended Friday prayers and joined iftar meals during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan (Wuthrich and Ingleby, 2020, p.33) and in so doing challenged the propaganda of the ruling party over the last two decades that has positioned the RPP at the center in the well-trodden center-periphery divide in Turkey.

Although Ateş İlyas Başsoy and party strategists understand the term populism to have pejorative connotations and consider these tactics as a means of struggling against polarizing populism, their embrace of different segments of society during the campaign provides some clues about the new direction of the CHP's left-populist strategy in the future. Moreover, as discussed above with reference to İnce, İmamoğlu's views and policy suggestions concerning economic and identity issues in Turkey would provide more clues about the prospects of left populism within the party.

## **Concluding Remarks**

The crisis of social democracy in Turkey since the early 1990s is a popular issue of debate among scholars of Turkish politics. Similarly, the need for a democratic left populism, of the type that emerged in the mid-1970s under Ecevit or (albeit partly) in the early 1990s with the

electoral successes of the SHP, to counter the predominant power of the ruling party is also a topic of frequent discussion. Although left-populist leaders have recently achieved some successes, as seen in the popularity of Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, Sanders in the USA, and Corbyn in the UK, it is safe to argue that the populist appeal of the main opposition party in Turkey has not been able to transform the crisis of neoliberalism into electoral support for democratic leftist values. Obviously, the decline of trades-unionist politics in Turkey, the falling rates of union membership, and the success of the ruling party in breaking the organized working classes during the sweeping privatization programs have had a profound impact. Moreover, the party's failure to provide an expansionist strategic appeal for the solution of economic and identity crises has been instrumental in limiting democratic left-populism in Turkey.

As seen both in the campaign of İnce and the performance of candidates during the local elections of March 2019, the party's discarding of its tradition of criticizing the social aid system could be seen as a positive step for a populist appeal focusing on the notion of economic redistribution. Moreover, given that the deepening economic crisis and the impact of the pandemic will make it more difficult for the ruling party to carry on with its comprehensive social transfer policy for the poor/highly indebted families which has allied them to the party, future developments in such an appeal could play an increased role. However, as has been seen even in the recent parliamentary debates on the national budget, the continuing tradition within the party of focusing on the legacy of Kemalist nationalism and assertive secularism, rather than insisting on egalitarianism and economic redistributionism as well as the protection of fundamental ethnic and religious freedoms, may yet again obstruct the development of a democratic left-populism.

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- 1 Two great volumes may be safely suggested to cover these studies, see Kaltwasser, Taggart, Espejo, Ostiguy (eds.) (2017); and De La Torre (ed.) (2019).
  - 2 For a successful and early attempt at analyzing left-populism in Turkey in the 1970s, see Erdoğan (1998).
  - 3 For example, seeking to compare left and right wing populism in Turkey and Greece, Grigoriadis focuses on the dominance of right-wing populism in Turkey, rather than on analyzing the origins and performance of the Turkish left-variant. See Grigoriadis (2020). Similarly Aytaç and Öniş (2014) compare left-populism in Argentina with right-wing populism in Turkey. Filc (2019) also covers populism in Turkey and also totally ignores the left-populist legacy.
  - 4 For studies critical of such approaches, see Duzgun (2012), Dinler (2003), and Güngen and Erten (2005).
  - 5 For an analysis of such uses of populism in Turkey, see Baykan (2014). For an early work in documenting the evolution of the principle of populism in Turkey, see Tekeli and Şaylan (1978).
  - 6 Peker argued that neither the Labor Law nor the Law on Associations would lead to the birth of class consciousness in Turkey. Cited in Karpas (1959, p. 109).
  - 7 For the details of this concept, see Kuru (2007).
  - 8 It should be emphasized that the authoritarian practices of the single-party regime were more instrumental than its populist justification of class inequalities on the development of class politics.

- 9 Ecevit had previously conceptualized the CHP's new form of populism at the party's 1959 convention. See Ciddi (2009, p. 39). Similar populist themes in the party's discourse could be observed when the CHP lost power in the 1950 election and Kasım Gülek was elected as the new general secretary of the party for the long 1950s. He emerged as a critic of the party noting that it would only win an election if it "really" became the party of the "people" as its name implied, however, this analysis was unable to successfully challenge the over-arching role of statist discourse in the party in the 1950s. For the Gülek's ideas, see Balcı (2015).
- 10 See Ecevit (1966). See also Emre (2013) on the historical foundation of the social democratic idea within the CHP.
- 11 For the history of the Turkish Workers Party (TİP), see Ünsal (2002).
- 12 On the significant shift in the party's discourse from the 1960s to the 1970s, particularly the election program for the 1977 elections, see Ciddi (2009, pp. 40–41).
- 13 For an analysis of Kemalist NGOs in Turkey, see Borovalı and Boyraz (2016).
- 14 However, it is important to note that in certain big municipalities the electoral base of the main opposition party pursued an ultimately successful strategy of voting for the pro-Kurdish HDP to get it over the 10 percent electoral threshold and so decrease the ruling party's tally of parliamentary seats. This was also evident in the elections of June 24, 2018.
- 15 For an example, see Deniz Bağlan. (2018). "Sekiz maddede #İncepopülizm," May 22, available at <http://www.diken.com.tr/sekiz-maddede-incepopulizm/>.
- 16 For an example, see the debate of Demirkent, Diñçer. 2018. "Muhafazakar Seçmen Miti," *GazeteDüvar*, May 3, available at <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/yazarlar/2018/05/03/muhafazakar-secmen-miti/>
- 17 For example, see Şengül, Tarık, İnce *Popülizm*, May 5, 2018, available at <https://www.birgun.net/haber-detay/ince-populizm-214704.html>.
- 18 "Rakibim beyaz Türk ben ise zenciyim," *Milliyet*, June 11, 2018, available at <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/siyaset/rakibim-beyaz-turk-ben-ise-zenciyim-2686240>.
- 19 "Muharrem İnce'den 'gariban' yanıtı", *Hürriyet*, May 8, 2018, available at <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/muharrem-ince-den-gariban-yaniti-40829942>.
- 20 "Muharrem İnce Rize'de: Ekonomi iyiyse dolar niye yukarı çıkıyor?" *Evrensel*, May 11, 2018, available at <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/352232/muharrem-ince-rizede-ekonomi-iyiyse-dolar-niye-yukari-cikiyor>
- 21 Kadri Gürsel, notes that though it is unclear why İnce started by saying "we Sunnis, such a strategy was crucial to challenge the religious sectarian discourse of the ruling party. See Gürsel, Kadri (2018). "Muharrem İnce'yle bozulan mezhepçilik oyunu," *Cumhuriyet*, May 8. Available at [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/koseyazisi/970784/Muharrem\\_ince\\_yle\\_bozulan\\_mezhepçilik\\_oyunu.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/koseyazisi/970784/Muharrem_ince_yle_bozulan_mezhepçilik_oyunu.html).
- 22 For a critical pessimistic view of the prospects of İnce's left-populism, see Öz, Asım (2018). "Popülizm, Muharrem İnce ve Sol," *Kriter*, July-August 2018, No. 26, available at <https://kriterdergi.com/siyaset/populizm-muharrem-ince-ve-sol>. And for an optimistic comment, see Engin, Aydın. 2018. "İnce ince, kalın kalın populizm," *Cumhuriyet*, May 31, available at [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/koseyazisi/986509/ince\\_ince\\_kalin\\_kalin\\_populizm.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/koseyazisi/986509/ince_ince_kalin_kalin_populizm.html).
- 23 For a Marxist critique of such separation of the political from the economic, see Wood (1995).
- 24 See *Hürriyet* (2018). "Soğan kuru dolar kurunu geçmişse yangın var demektir," available at <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/muharrem-ince-sogan-kuru-dolar-kurunu-gemis-se-yanin-var-demektir-40873650>
- 25 For a study in this context analyzing the Spanish case, see Kioupkiolis (2016).
- 26 This article was originally written before the 2019 local elections and then revised after these elections when some other signs of prospects for left-populism were observed.
- 27 CHP, *Radikal Sevgi Kitabı* [The Book of Radical Love], (2019), available at <http://dijitalmecmua.chp.org.tr/CHPRadikal%20SevgiKitabiEng.pdf>. See also "A Turkish Opposition Leader Is Fighting Erdoğan With 'Radical Love'," Melvyn Ingleby, June 14, 2019, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/06/ex-istanbul-mayor-i-mamoglu-fights-erdogan-radical-love/591541/>; Nick Ashdown, "'Radical Love Book' Hailed as Key to Turkish Opposition Election Success," *Middle East Eye*, April 11, 2019, available at <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/radical-love-book-ailed-key-turkish-opposition-election-success>.
- 28 "Turkish opposition turns to Radical Love to smother Erdogan," M. Tokyay, *Euronews*, April 25, 2019, available at <https://www.euronews.com/2019/04/24/turkish-opposition-turns-to-radical-love-to-battle-erdogan>.

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