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A Symptomatic Analysis of the Justice and Development Party's Populism in Turkey, 2007–2010

THE ORIGINS OF THE JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY (JDP) CAN BE traced back to the 1970s.² It is the latest representative of a chain of Islamist parties, which started with the establishment of the National Order Party in 1970. Accused of being the focal point of fundamentalist activities attempting to undermine the secular nature of the Republic, these parties have been closed down over the years either by military administrations or by the Constitutional Court. First, the National Order Party was closed down by the Constitutional Court in May 1971. Following that, the National Salvation Party, which was established in November 1971, survived until the military coup d'état in September 1980.³ After the end of the military regime in 1983, the Welfare Party (WP) was founded to continue the ideology and programme of the defunct Salvation Party. Despite popular support (for example, it had 21 per cent of the votes in the 1995 election) for the WP, which enabled it to form a coalition government (June 1996–June 1997) with the centre-right True Path Party, it was closed down by the Constitutional Court in January 1998, again due to the party's

¹ I would like to thank Feroz Ahmad and Yaşar Geyikdağı for their invaluable comments and suggestions, which greatly improved this article. All remaining errors are solely the author's responsibility.

² Feroz Ahmad, 'Politics and Islam in Modern Turkey', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 27: 1 (1991), pp. 3–21.

³ For an analysis of the Islamist parties before 1980, see Binnaz Toprak, *Islam and Political Development in Turkey*, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1981; and Yaşar Geyikdağı, *Political Parties in Turkey: The Role of Islam*, New York, Praeger, 1984.

anti-secular activities, following the so-called ‘postmodern coup’ on 28 February 1997.⁴

The closure of the party brought to notice two factions within the party, namely, the liberal reformists and the conservatives. The liberal reformists seemed to be more moderate towards the establishment and less critical of the country’s economic and political systems. Among them, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (b. 1954), the former mayor of Istanbul, was a significant and popular figure. The conservatives, on the other hand, represented the old school, which aimed to preserve the party’s traditional constituency from the time of the National Order Party. Although Necmettin Erbakan (1926–2011), the founder and ‘eternal leader’ of Islamist parties in Turkey, had been banned from politics, he was still influential in the newly established Virtue Party.⁵ When the liberals challenged the conservatives, his support enabled the conservatives to dominate the party.

The opportunity that the reformists were looking for came when the Constitutional Court banned the Virtue Party in June 2001. Following the closure of the party, the conservatives regrouped as the Felicity Party, and the liberals founded the Justice and Development Party under Erdoğan’s leadership.⁶ The Felicity Party preferred to adhere to the traditional support of its Islamist base despite the drastic political changes both at home and in the world. By contrast, the liberal wing constructed a new identity for their party which was ‘moderately religious’ and neo-liberal in its essence. Although they did not directly declare that they were no longer Islamists, they claimed that they had evolved over time and adapted themselves to the changing conditions in the world. They described themselves as conservative democrats, though most people understood that as meaning ‘Muslim democrats’, similar to Christian democrats in the West.⁷ They began to advocate a competitive market economy,

⁴ The military intervention on 28 February was labelled as a ‘postmodern coup’ by the radical-liberal journalist Cengiz Çandar. See C. Çandar, ‘Redefining Turkey’s Political Center’, *Journal of Democracy*, 10: 4 (1999), pp. 129–41.

⁵ Metin Heper and Şule Toktaş, ‘Islam, Modernity and Democracy in Contemporary Turkey: The Case of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’, *Muslim World*, 93 (2003), p. 159.

⁶ R. Quinn Meham, ‘From the Ashes of Virtue, a Promise of Light: The Transformation of Political Islam in Turkey’, *Third World Quarterly*, 25: 2 (2004), pp. 339–58.

⁷ William Hale, ‘Christian Democracy and the AKP: Parallels and Contrasts’, *Turkish Studies*, 6: 2 (2005), pp. 293–310.

supported neo-liberal economic policies similar to the previous prescriptions of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and supported the EU membership process for Turkey. Moreover, the economic crisis in 2001 caused people to lose their faith in mainstream political parties. Within this context the JDP seemed to be an alternative for many people who had not previously voted for an Islamist party. Beyond this, the newly emerging Muslim bourgeoisie of Anatolia, whose interests lay in the implementation of neo-liberal economic policies, also supported the JDP.⁸ Not surprisingly, the traditional conservative constituency of the Islamist parties joined this coalition, adding to the support base of the JDP. As a result, soon after its establishment, the JDP won 363 seats in the parliament, garnering over 34 per cent of the votes in the general election on 3 November 2002.⁹

During its term in office, the JDP government has oscillated between neo-liberalism and Islamism.¹⁰ On the one hand, it followed neo-liberal economic policies in order to keep its campaign promise of (re)building economic stability and good governance. On the other hand, it attempted to pursue an Islamist agenda to appease its conservative base. Faced with making a choice between these two policies, it usually sacrificed its Islamist ideology for the sake of economic stability. This was a rational choice in the sense that only economic stability could hold together the groups that formed the party's support base.¹¹ Insistence on an Islamist attitude would have confined the party's support to conservative Muslims living in central and eastern Anatolia.

⁸ Hakan Yavuz elaborated the emergence of an independent Islamic bourgeoisie in Anatolia as opposed to or as an alternative to the secularist Istanbul bourgeoisie in his book *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003.

⁹ One of the most comprehensive analyses of the 2002 elections was made by Ali Çarkoğlu and Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, *Turkish Democracy Today: Elections, Protest and Stability in an Islamic Society*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2007.

¹⁰ For a liberal account of the JDP see William Hale and Ergun Özbudun, *Islamism, Democracy and Liberalism in Turkey: The Case of AKP*, New York, Routledge, 2010.

¹¹ Kalaycıoğlu claims that 'partisan affiliations followed by the voter satisfaction with the performance of the economy played the biggest role in determining the voter preferences in Turkey in the 2007 elections.' See Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, 'Justice and Development Party at the Helm: Resurgence of Islam or Restitution of the Right-of-Center Predominant Party?' *Turkish Studies*, 11: 1 (2010), pp. 29–44.

Nevertheless, the JDP government did push several ideological issues to the forefront of the national agenda. For example, the *türban*, a kind of Islamic headscarf, had been forbidden in public places in Turkey, as required by the secular Constitution.¹² On several occasions the JDP attempted to reinterpret secularism in a flexible manner to allow the wearing of headscarves on university campuses and in other public places such as government offices, schools and hospitals. Bülent Arınç, an ardent member of the JDP and the then president of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (GNAT), once said that there was a need to reinterpret laicism by taking conservative-religious views into account.¹³

The JDP government also aimed to revise the university entrance system,¹⁴ as it discourages graduates from vocational schools from entering a department different from their field of study. The intention was to clear the way for graduates of religious ‘preacher schools’ (*imam-hatip okulları*) to enter any university department. Thus, people with a background in religious education could hold various positions in society, rather than only having the option of becoming preachers or imams. The JDP government came into conflict with the Council of Higher Education (YÖK), the institution regulating university education in Turkey over the issue of religious schools and over the wearing of *türbans*. YÖK claimed that opening university doors to graduates of religious schools, allowing them to become medical doctors, engineers, lawyers and teachers, would violate the principle of secularism.¹⁵

¹² The Constitutional Court has a long record of decisions that annulled government motions liberating the wearing of the *türban* in the public space. One of the first decisions of the court is dated 7 March 1989. See *Anayasa Mahkemesi Kararlar Dergisi* [*The Journal of the Constitutional Court's Decisions*], 25, pp. 133–65. For a critical account of the court's decisions, see Abdurrahman Saygılı, ‘What is Behind the Headscarf Ruling of the Turkish Constitutional Court?’, *Turkish Studies*, 11: 2 (2010), pp. 127–41. On the *türban* issue, see also Elisabeth Özdalga, *The Veiling Issue, Official Secularism and Popular Islam in Modern Turkey*, Richmond, Curzon Press, 1997.

¹³ *Milliyet*, 5 October 2006.

¹⁴ This university entrance system was adopted after the so-called ‘postmodern coup’ of 28 February 2007. The new model discouraged students from obtaining a religious high-school education unless they were going to pursue a university degree in the Islamic theosophy.

¹⁵ After he was elected the new president, Abdullah Gül appointed Yusuf Ziya Özcan as the president of the Council of Higher Education. Professor Özcan is known

Another debate between secularist institutions and the JDP government was over a JDP proposal to amend the criminal code to criminalize adultery. Ironically, this amendment was proposed within the framework of EU conditionality on the democratization of the Turkish legal code. Facing harsh criticism from the opposition, the press, the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the European Union, the JDP was forced to step back and remove this proposal.¹⁶

These incidents were perceived in secularist segments of society as events that unmasked the JDP's true intention: to reverse the modernity achieved by Kemal Atatürk. From the secularists' point of view, the final blow came with the presidential elections of 2007. The JDP refused to work towards a consensus in the Assembly, and their unilateral attitude in choosing the candidate led to an impasse in electing the new president. The opposition's stonewalling over the presidential elections in the Assembly contributed to the electoral success of the JDP, with the adoption of a populist strategy both in the early general and in the subsequent presidential elections. The key elements of Erdoğan's populism during and after the 2007 presidential elections are detailed, but first it is necessary to define more accurately the concept of populism in order to draw a framework for analysis.

APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF POPULISM

One of the earliest studies of the issue of populism was carried out by Edward Shils, who suggests that the most crucial aspect of populism is the supremacy of the will of the people.¹⁷ In line with this idea, says Shils, there ought to be a direct relationship between people and

for his liberal attitude towards the Islamic headscarf. The council under Özcan allowed the *türban* on university campuses in September 2010 despite the precedent of the Constitutional Court. One should also note that the RPP's position on the *türban* issue radically changed in 2010. Under its new leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the RPP began to give greater precedence to the socio-economic inequalities that prevail across the country, and left its strict secularist position behind.

¹⁶ *Radikal*, 27 September 2004.

¹⁷ Edward Shils, *The Torment of Secrecy: The Background and Consequences of American Security Policies*, London, Heinemann, 1956.

government, and therefore the role of the intermediary institutions should be minimized to ensure the rule of the people. Several prominent scholars in the field also define populism as an appeal to the people. Canovan, for example, suggests that 'populism in modern societies is best seen as an appeal to the people against both the established structure and the dominant ideas and values of the society'.¹⁸ Taggart argues that 'populist movements are of the people but not of the system'.¹⁹ For him, populist movements represent the discontent of the silent majority within the political system. In short, there is academic consensus that populism is a result of resentment at the establishment. It denotes the pursuit of power to create a government for the people according to the people, rather than a government for the people despite the people.

Although there is a significant degree of academic consensus on the meaning of populism, scholars in the field have pursued at least three different methods of studying it: empiricism, historicism and symptomatic reading. The empiricist approach attempts to elicit a set of defining characteristics of the term by focusing on the cases of populism across the world. Among the followers of this approach, Peter Wiles elaborates on the cases of populism as varied as the Narodniki movement, Gandhi and Sinn Féin. Although he undertakes his analysis of these widely different cases without taking into account the political-historical context, Wiles manages to link the concept of populism to several general characteristics, thereby constructing a typology. But, he admits, no single case can be found that displays all the features listed in his ideal type.²⁰ Thus, this approach could not be implemented in explaining single case studies. It rather serves the purposes of comparative studies that focus on multiple cases. As a result, this approach does not serve our needs as an analytical instrument.

Another approach is historicism, which situates populism within the social, political and economic circumstances of a certain

¹⁸ Margaret Canovan, 'Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy', *Political Studies*, 47: 1 (1999), p. 3.

¹⁹ Paul Taggart, *New Populism and the New Politics*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1996, p. 32.

²⁰ Peter Wiles, 'A Syndrome, Not a Doctrine: Some Elementary Theses on Populism', in G. Ionescu and E. Gellner (eds), *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970, pp. 166–79.

historical period.²¹ Panizza suggests that ‘the vast literature that restricts the term [populism] to the golden era of populist politics, spanning from the economic crisis of the 1930s to the demise of the import-substitution-industrialization (ISI) model of development in the late 1960s’ exemplifies the historicist approach.²² The problem with this approach is that it has an overly limited scope. In the way it has been used, the historicist approach is too narrowly bound by temporal and geographical considerations and analyses populism as a singular event related to the peculiarity of a political situation within a specific period of time. This would be an appropriate model to follow if one were to study the populism of the Democrat Party in Turkey, which pursued policies in response to the demands of the people during its term in office (1950–60).²³ An analysis of whether the populism of the Democrat Party was an outcome of the socio-economic conditions that prevailed in the 1950s would be a study based on the historicist approach. However, this article’s focus is on a contemporary case of populism that cannot be explained solely on the basis of its timeframe. Thus, this approach will not suit the purposes of this article either.

As a remedy to the deficiencies of the previous approaches, Panizza suggests another method, which entails a symptomatic reading of populism.²⁴ Referring to the works of Laclau,²⁵ he argues that it is possible to study populism free from temporal and spatial boundaries through an analysis of the discourse articulated by populist leaders. In such an analysis, scholars search for ‘symptoms’ of populism in the discourse of the political leaders. The first symptom sought is a central reference to the people within a discourse that dichotomizes society into two major antagonistic segments: ‘the people’ and its ‘other’ – the elite, the establishment or the ruling class.²⁶ Naturally, populist politicians side with the people in this antagonistic relationship. Their purpose is to restore ‘the rule of the

²¹ Francesco Panizza, ‘Introduction’, in Francesco Panizza (ed.), *Populism and Mirror of Democracy*, London, Verso, 2005, p. 3.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ İlkay Sunar, ‘Populism and Patronage: The Demokrat Party and its Legacy in Turkey’, *Il Politico*, 55: 4 (1990), pp. 745–57.

²⁴ Panizza, ‘Introduction’.

²⁵ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London, Verso, 2005; and Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory, Capitalism, Fascism*, London, Verso, 1977.

²⁶ Ernesto Laclau, ‘Populism: What’s in a Name?’ in Panizza, *Populism*, p. 38.

people' through the ultimate defeat of 'the elite', who, for them, not only exploits the people, but also prevents them from achieving power.

The second symptom is composed of the notion of unfulfilled demands and an anti-institutional attitude in the discourse of the politicians.²⁷ Constructing a symbolic division in society becomes possible at times of political, cultural, social and economic crises, which cause a loss of popular confidence in the political system's ability to restore the social order.²⁸ Therefore, people begin to look for an alternative movement that may become a remedy to their unfulfilled demands during times of crisis. Populist politicians manipulate the unfulfilled demands to set up an imaginary unity among the people and present institutional inability as a scapegoat to be blamed for the unmet demands of the people. Thus, in the symptomatic approach the construction of a symbolic antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elite' through the notion of unfulfilled demands and an anti-institutional attitude in the discourse of politicians subsequent to a crisis indicate populism.²⁹

In this article, the symptomatic approach is preferred as a methodological tool over the other approaches because it brings the greatest clarity to the case at hand. In the context of the JDP's populism, the discourse of the JDP leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, will be analysed during and after the presidential election crisis in 2007. Thereby, answers will be sought for the following queries that are necessary for understanding contemporary politics in Turkey: How and why did the parliament fail to elect the president? Which symptoms of populism can be found in the discourse of Erdoğan following the presidential election crisis? Who are the people that Erdoğan and his party claim to represent, and who are 'the enemies of the people' that the party strives to combat? How were the people impeded from ruling the country? Which institutions were held responsible from the institutional inability and unfulfilled demand of popular sovereignty? Answers to these questions are sought below through the symptomatic approach to the study of populism.

²⁷ Yannis Stavrakakis, 'Religion and Populism in Contemporary Greece', in Panizza, *Populism*, p. 243.

²⁸ Panizza, 'Introduction', p. 11.

²⁹ Stavrakakis, 'Religion and Populism in Contemporary Greece', pp. 224–50.

THE JDP'S POPULISM

A decade on from the events, the traumatic memory of the Constitutional Court's intervention to close the Welfare Party still lingered in the mind of the JDP leadership. In the period that preceded the closure of the WP, a group of army officers known as the Western Working Group (*Bati Çalışma Grubu*) had systematically criticized the Islamist government of the time and operated in the political sphere as if they were an opposition party. The group's damaging reports eventually brought about the downfall of the Islamist government, something that, by 2007, the JDP administration was eager to avoid. However, conditions were not ripe for any kind of military involvement in politics. Unlike the WP in 1997, the JDP had the absolute majority in parliament and managed to form the cabinet without needing to build a coalition. Furthermore, the JDP had also established a reputation for good management of the economy since it came to power in 2002.³⁰ A military intervention against the JDP would disrupt economic stability and would therefore lack the necessary popular support and legitimacy. As a result, the JDP had the upper hand in the last stage of the conflict between the army and the Islamist parties.³¹ Erdoğan was therefore confident enough to warn 'the people' against possible 'manipulations' by the army on the tenth anniversary of the 28 February closure of the party. He said that people should not believe any horror stories being manufactured to

³⁰ It has also been claimed that economic stability was quite fragile or even illusive when 'sustained unemployment and poverty, a growing "black" or informal economy and economic uncertainty, and the increasing macroeconomic vulnerability of the economy due to current account deficits and mounting domestic and international debt' are taken into account. Mine Eder, 'A Cynical Look at "The Secularism Debate" in Turkey', in B. Kosmin and A. Keysar (eds), *Secularism, Women and the State: The Mediterranean World in the 21st Century*, Hartford, CT, Trinity College, 2009, p. 242.

³¹ On the JDP and military relations see Metin Heper, 'The Justice and Development Party Government and the Military in Turkey', *Turkish Studies*, 6: 2 (2005), pp. 215–31; Gareth Jenkins, 'Symbols and Shadow Play: Military–JDP Relations', in Hakan Yavuz (ed.), *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Democracy and the AK Party*, Salt Lake, University of Utah Press, 2006, pp.185–206; Ümit Cizre, 'The Justice and Development Party and the Military: Recreating the Past after Reforming it?', in Ümit Cizre (ed.), *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of the Justice and Development Party*, London, Routledge, 2008, pp. 132–71.

pave the way for a possible coup.³² He further argued: ‘It is only “the people” who can protect the Republic – not an institution. They [the military bureaucracy] seek to protect their self-interest and not that of the Republic. An institution [again referring to the army] should not claim a monopoly for the responsibility in preserving the republican regime.’³³

Evidently, Erdoğan was worried about the upcoming presidential elections. As they had on 12 September 1980, the military officers could have claimed that there was an institutional inability to elect a president and thus shelved the Constitution in order to restore their hegemony. Therefore Erdoğan needed to avoid a crisis over the presidential election. Despite this, he sought no political or social consensus on the choice of candidate. For him, the majority he enjoyed in the parliament would suffice to get his party’s candidate elected.

As the opposition called for negotiations to seek a consensus over the identity of the presidential nominee, Erdoğan responded with an uncompromising attitude: ‘If you have enough confidence, nominate someone. Then you will see how much credit is granted to you by the parliament and the people.’³⁴ Needing only unanimity among the ranks of his party, he made it clear that he would not seek any support from the opposition for the JDP’s presidential candidate. He authorized a survey to be conducted among JDP members in order to test the feeling among the party organization. It revealed that cabinet members Beşir Atalay, Mehmet Aydın and Vecdi Gönül, and JDP member of parliament, Köksal Toptan, were listed as possible nominees.³⁵ This survey caused a stir among the party members because the list of possible candidates only included those whose wives did not wear the ‘Islamic’ headscarf. As a result, none of the candidates could become the party candidate.

In the meantime, Erdoğan met representatives of some NGOs, including the mainstream workers union, Türk-İş.³⁶ He also met the leaders of the Motherland and the True Path parties – the mainstream right-wing parties that were represented in parliament with

³² *Zaman*, 28 February 2007.

³³ *Radikal*, 28 February 2007.

³⁴ *Radikal*, 12 March 2007.

³⁵ *Radikal*, 17 March 2007.

³⁶ *Radikal*, 5 April 2007.

only 20 and 3 members respectively. He was asked to announce the candidate before any agreement of support was made.³⁷ Despite his efforts to reach a deal with some NGOs and some political parties, Erdoğan firmly refused to discuss the elections with the Republican People's Party (RPP), the main opposition party.³⁸ It appears that he expected to gain more from the opposition of the RPP than from any kind of collaboration with it. Eventually, Erdoğan conducted personal interviews with the leading members of his party.³⁹ The message of the party elite was clear: they all wanted him to become the next president of the Republic.⁴⁰ In the end, the party's central executive committee gave the final word to Erdoğan on the presidential candidate.⁴¹ In line with this decision, Bülent Arınç, the president of the GNAT, said, 'Erdoğan is going to decide and we will support his decision.'⁴²

The response to Erdoğan, who continually underscored the unsustainability of his majority, came from Sabih Kanadoğlu, the former chief prosecutor of the Supreme Court of Appeal. He claimed that a two-thirds quorum should be present in the Assembly to start the process of electing the new president.⁴³ The committee of university rectors, which convened under the auspices of the Council of Higher Education, also stressed the necessity of seeking a consensus over the identity of the candidate. Moreover, under the presidency of Erdoğan Teziç, a distinguished professor of constitutional law, the committee asserted that the number of parliamentarians required to be present in the Assembly during the election rounds must be 367, and the lack of a quorum would annul the electoral process.⁴⁴ The main opposition party, the RPP, also declared that it would boycott the presidential elections unless the JDP agreed to seek a consensus over the candidate. These groups thereby hoped to convince Erdoğan to negotiate with the opposition while he was making the final decision about the presidential nominee.

³⁷ *Radikal*, 18 April 2007.

³⁸ *Radikal*, 11 April 2007.

³⁹ *Zaman*, 29 March 2007.

⁴⁰ *Radikal*, 7 April 2007.

⁴¹ *Zaman*, 19 April 2007.

⁴² *Zaman*, 21 April 2007.

⁴³ *Radikal*, 26 December 2006.

⁴⁴ *Hürriyet*, 6 April 2007.

At issue was the secularists' fear that an Islamist president would bring about the end of the secular regime in Turkey. Arınç accentuated these fears, stating bluntly that this time Turkey would have 'a civilian, democratic and religious president'.⁴⁵ On behalf of the secularists, General Yaşar Büyükanıt, the Chief of General Staff, stated that the army expected the candidate to be 'not seemingly but sincerely' adhering to the values of the Republic.⁴⁶ On the same front, outgoing President Ahmet Necdet Sezer expressed his concern that a tyranny of the majority would threaten secular democracy,⁴⁷ and, at this stage, many people in Turkey were concerned at the prospect of having a 'religious-Islamist' president. They joined the republican rallies, which convened for the first time in the capital, on 14 April. During the demonstrations, the secularist masses displayed their opposition both to an Islamist president and to military intervention through the slogans: 'The roads of *Çankaya* are closed to the sharia,' and 'We want neither the sharia nor the junta.'⁴⁸

Erdoğan's response to the rally was dichotomous. On the one hand, he acknowledged that the demonstrations were a democratic right, and was also reported to have said that he accepted the protest with democratic maturity. On the other hand, he strongly stressed the superiority of the electoral majority, and argued that the final word always belonged to those who came first in elections.⁴⁹ According to a newsletter published by the press office of the prime minister, Erdoğan said that 'diverse political inclinations in our country do not indicate an illness; on the contrary they indicate how healthy our country is.'⁵⁰ He continued by saying that there was only one Turkey and it was not right to divide it by simply looking at differences of opinion: 'As citizens of this country, we are united and, together, we are the owners of this land.'⁵¹

One may argue that Erdoğan seemed to oppose the division of society into secularists (the elite) and Islamists (the people). Nevertheless, he himself contributed to the division of society by

⁴⁵ *Hürriyet*, 16 April 2007.

⁴⁶ *Hürriyet*, 13 April 2007.

⁴⁷ *Hürriyet*, 14 April 2007.

⁴⁸ *Radikal*, 15 April 2007.

⁴⁹ *Zaman*, 4 April 2007.

⁵⁰ Office of the Prime Minister, press release, 17 April 2007.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

disregarding the opposition inside and outside parliament. From 16 April, when the election campaign began, until the candidacy application deadline on 24 April, he did not allow any discussion even within his own party over who would be nominated from the JDP. Eventually, declining to reach any social or political consensus, Erdoğan announced that Abdullah Gül, the minister of foreign affairs, whose wife wears a headscarf, would be the JDP's nominee to the presidency on the final day of the nomination. With this decision, Erdoğan hoped to win a victory on two fronts. By nominating Gül, he not only satisfied the Islamist constituency but also saw off a potential rival for party leadership.

At this stage, Erdoğan also started a campaign in support of Gül's presidency. In this campaign he first introduced Gül as the candidate of 'the people' not of 'the elite' with the following:

Our candidate has all sorts of qualifications to achieve general acceptance both in the Assembly and in society. He will become a president who will embrace society with integrity and all social values, and represent the people with merit . . . [By nominating Gül] we want the presidency (*Çankaya*) to be united with its people. Only for this reunion, *Cumhur* [Gül's first name, literally means folk] is going to *Çankaya*.⁵²

He thereby began to impose the idea that Abdullah Gül was someone of the people, represented the people, and was thus the candidate of the people.

As the campaign continued, Erdoğan also put forward the idea that the majority in parliament represented the will of the people and therefore would be enough to elect the president. He argued that the president of the people should be elected by the representatives of the people. In parliament the representatives of the people made decisions with a majority vote. Thus a majority vote in parliament represented the will of the people, and anyone who acted against the will of the majority in parliament would impede the people's will. In his words: 'The Assembly will have the final say [over the presidential elections], and the decision of our Assembly will be the decision of our nation.'⁵³ One can infer from these statements that Erdoğan pursued a strategy in which he not only turned his party's candidate into the people's candidate but also equated 'majority' in parliament with 'the national will'.

⁵² Office of the Prime Minister, press release, 24 April 2007.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

The first round of elections was held on 26 April. In the middle of the night following the first round, the Office of the Chief of General Staff issued a memorandum reminding the public that the army in Turkey had the duty and responsibility of protecting the fundamental principles of the Republic.⁵⁴ Through this declaration, the armed forces made their concerns known about the debate over secularism during the presidential elections. Published on the website of the General Staff, this 'e-memorandum' heightened the worries in parts of society that there would be a military intervention in the event that an Islamist or 'a devout Muslim' were elected to the presidency. The public immediately received the memorandum with precisely the opposite effect to that desired by the secularists. Similar to all other military interventions in the history of the Republic, this political intervention boomeranged and changed the course of events only in favour of the Islamist JDP by engendering popular empathy for the party that appeared to be the victim in this process.

On the following day, the prime minister refrained from giving a direct answer to the army memorandum. He preferred the cabinet to release a press statement denying any disloyalty to the fundamental principles of the Republic. The cabinet also reminded the country that the army was an institution under the jurisdiction of the prime minister.⁵⁵ Additionally, Abdullah Gül stated that he would not withdraw his candidacy.

In the final stage of the presidential election process, the RPP, along with other opposition parties, boycotted the elections and declined to attend the parliamentary sessions. Despite that, the JDP attempted to elect the president via a majority vote without a quorum. This election was annulled by the Constitutional Court upon the appeal of the RPP. The first round of elections was repeated, but the JDP again failed to bring 367 MPs into the session. Gül had to withdraw his candidacy. As a result, the state institutions were gridlocked and failed to elect a president.

This institutional inability facilitated the adoption of populist rhetoric in which society was divided into 'the people' and 'the elite'. From Erdoğan's point of view, the institutions of the political

⁵⁴ Turkish Armed Forces, press release, 27 April 2007. The 'e-memorandum' was removed from the website of the General Staff on 29 August 2011.

⁵⁵ *Zaman*, 29 April 2007; *Radikal*, 29 April 2007.

establishment, including the Constitutional Court, the army, the presidency, the Council of Higher Education, the RPP and the NGOs organizing the republican rallies formed an alliance to prevent people from achieving power, and thereby constituted ‘the elite’ in opposition to ‘the people’. At the same time, the candidate of the JDP, backed by the majority in parliament, represented ‘the people’. By preventing the majority in parliament from electing the president, these institutions blocked ‘the will of the people’ and thereby became ‘the enemies of the people’.

Among the ranks of the ‘enemies of the people’, Erdoğan assigned the first place to the Constitutional Court in his rhetoric. For him, the court had a bad record of legislating from the bench, overriding ‘the will of the nation’. Beyond this, the profile of the court members was another source of uneasiness. As most of its members were of secularist background, Erdoğan overtly criticized their decisions and accused them of being politically biased.⁵⁶ Although Tülay Tuğcu, the president of the court, reminded the prime minister of the significance of the rule of law and the binding nature of legal decisions, Erdoğan held the court responsible for the institutional crisis over the election of the president.⁵⁷ He said that the court’s decision that annulled the first round of the presidential elections was ‘a disaster, a shameful incident’.⁵⁸ It was a ‘bullet fired on democracy’.⁵⁹ He described this as a violation of democracy because with this decision ‘the will of the majority was imprisoned by the will of the minority’.⁶⁰

In order to set the will of the majority free, the JDP government decided to amend several articles of the Constitution. These amendments would redefine the electoral processes so that the president would be elected by a popular vote rather than by a qualified majority of the parliamentarians.⁶¹ Furthermore, presidents now could be elected to a second term, as in the USA. However, the RPP immediately voiced its opposition to the proposed amendments, creating yet another opportunity for Erdoğan to criticize the elitism of the republicans. He said, ‘We are now going to the people but they are running

⁵⁶ *Zaman*, 28 May 2007.

⁵⁷ *Hürriyet*, 31 May 2007.

⁵⁸ *Hürriyet*, 30 May 2007.

⁵⁹ Office of the Prime Minister, press release, 2 May 2007.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Zaman*, 2 May 2007.

away from the people. The RPP is scared of the people. It is not the people's party but the elite's party.⁶² He thereby once again appealed to 'the people' and asked them not to vote for those who did not trust them.

Despite the stonewalling by the opposition, Erdoğan was determined to amend the Constitution. However, he could not muster the two-thirds majority in parliament required to amend the Constitution. Although he pushed the measure through with a simple majority, President Ahmet Necdet Sezer vetoed it. With this veto, Sezer joined the ranks of 'the elite' as opposed to 'the people' in Erdoğan's discourse. Referring to Sezer's veto, he said, 'We are evaluating the decision of the president and so will history . . . Some people say, "you cannot handle this decision." Then, why does this legislative body exist, why do the members of this legislative body exist, and why does the nation exist?'⁶³ According to Erdoğan, the JDP was first prevented from electing the president in parliament and now it was being impeded in its efforts to take the issue to the people. He concluded that, once again, the national will was being obstructed by political institutions, this time by the presidency.

Following President Sezer's veto, Erdoğan found himself in a stalemate. His party had the majority in the Assembly, but a majority vote only allowed the government to take the amendment to a public referendum. At this stage, Erdoğan began to repeat the populist mantra of Turkish politicians that they would take their cause to the people by going to 'the bosom of the nation' (*sine-i millet*). Erdoğan even resorted to the Kemalist principle of populism. Although it was originally invented to fight against the sultanate, Erdoğan misappropriated the context of the Kemalist epigram 'sovereignty unconditionally belongs to the nation' and, ironically, used it against the Kemalist establishment.⁶⁴ He further argued that the nation would give the best answer to those who set conditions or placed barriers on national sovereignty. To this end, he called not only for a referendum but also for a general election. The idea was to defeat the intermediary institutions through elements of direct democracy within the representative model. In line with this strategy, he said:

⁶² *Radikal*, 17 May 2007.

⁶³ Office of the Prime Minister, press release, 29 May 2007.

⁶⁴ *Zaman*, 28 May 2007.

It is very well understood that they could not put up with the national will, with the nation having the last word. When multi-party politics was first introduced, those [the Democrat Party] who said ‘enough, the nation has the last word’, came to power with huge support . . . We first started the process of ‘enough, the nation has the last word’, now we say ‘enough, the nation will make the decision’ and that is how we will proceed. We will go to the nation . . . both for the general elections and for the presidential elections.⁶⁵

Now the conditions were ripe for Erdoğan to ask ‘the people’ to vote against ‘the elite’ who hindered the will of the people’s rule over the country.⁶⁶ He was quoted as saying:

The people shall decide who will be the president, prime minister and president of the Assembly. Previously, presidents were elected with the votes of 330 MPs. But we were not allowed to elect the president with 357 votes. This is not a democracy but something else. I expect that this crisis over the election of the president will continue after the general elections. Thus, I want you to elect more than 367 JDP members to the Assembly.⁶⁷

An argument that could defeat Erdoğan’s position was the one that emphasized his unilateral, uncompromising attitude in the presidential elections. When Deniz Baykal, the RPP leader, took up this argument in his discourse, Erdoğan immediately reacted with the following words: ‘One can only make a compromise with the nation [the people]. Is there any president other than Atatürk who was elected unanimously to the presidency?’⁶⁸ For him, the majority should be able to determine the outcome of any election, whether it be a popular one or a committee election. In line with this idea, he asserted, ‘the degree of one’s power solely relies on the number of votes received from the people. A minority should not overpower the majority.’⁶⁹ A counter-argument could easily be drawn up because Erdoğan’s discourse turned a blind eye to minority concerns. However, the leaders of the opposition parties were not as rhetorically gifted as Erdoğan and could not sway the masses as he could.

As a result, Erdoğan’s electoral strategy paid off. The party won an electoral victory on 22 July with 47 per cent of the vote and 341 seats in parliament. The RPP followed with 21 per cent of the vote and 112 seats. The Nationalist Action Party (NAP) entered parliament with 14

⁶⁵ Office of the Prime Minister, press release, 16 May 2007.

⁶⁶ Office of the Prime Minister, press release, 1 June 2007.

⁶⁷ *Hürriyet*, 23 June 2007; *Radikal*, 20 June 2007.

⁶⁸ *Zaman*, 11 July 2007.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

per cent of the vote and 71 seats, and the Kurdish ethnic-nationalists managed to cross over the 10 per cent national threshold as independent candidates, gaining 20 seats in the parliament as well. In the new session of parliament, Devlet Bahçeli, the NAP leader, revealed his party's position concerning the presidential elections by nominating a candidate from the ranks of his party. He clearly stated that the boycott of the presidential elections would severely harm the democratic processes in parliament.⁷⁰ Indeed, he was more concerned that there would be an expedient coalition of the JDP with the Kurdish nationalists.⁷¹ As a result, the NAP parliamentarians entered the voting sessions in order to support their party's candidate. Indirectly, they revealed their consent for the election of the JDP's candidate by making up the quorum of 367 votes.

From the JDP viewpoint, it was clear that this time the presidential election would be a smooth process. Again Abdullah Gül was nominated amid comments in the media that the presidency was 'the last fortress' of the Republic to be conquered by the Islamists.⁷² Some journalists and politicians openly stated that they would not recognize the presidency of Gül if he were elected.⁷³ Although Gül preferred to ignore such statements, they were nerve-wracking for Erdoğan, who proclaimed, 'those who do not recognize the president of the people should give up their citizenship.'⁷⁴ In the middle of this media storm, the JDP government managed to get its candidate elected to office on 28 August. On the very day he was elected, President Gül expressed messages of loyalty to the Republic and to the principles of democracy.⁷⁵ Since then, he has worked in harmony with the JDP government. Nevertheless, he also earned a reputation for his moderate, democratic and conciliatory attitude towards all segments of society.

However, President Gül's liberal understanding of democracy was hardly found in other circles of the JDP leadership. After victory in the presidential elections, the JDP wanted to conquer not only the electorate but the state as well. In its new term in office, the party

⁷⁰ *Zaman*, 27 July 2007.

⁷¹ *Hürriyet*, 20 July 2007.

⁷² *Zaman*, 26 August 2007.

⁷³ *Hürriyet*, 21 August 2007.

⁷⁴ *Hürriyet*, 22 August 2007.

⁷⁵ *Radikal*, 29 August 2007.

captured the authoritarian state structure as consolidated by the military regime between 1980 and 1983. It began to implement policies to turn the centralized institutional framework of the state against 'the elite', including the bureaucracy, the media, universities and the NGOs that had opposed the party during its first term in office. In academia and intellectual circles of present-day Turkey, this process is either perceived as the normalization and demilitarization of Turkish democracy or as a campaign to restructure these institutions to make them compatible with the JDP's Islamist ideology.

In fact, an investigation was launched against 'the enemies of national sovereignty', as they were perceived by the JDP. Within the so-called '*Ergenekon*' operation, retired generals, judges, prosecutors, journalists, professors, party and NGO leaders were arrested, together with the members of 'the Turkish deep-state', with allegations that they had been organizing a coup d'état against the previous JDP government.⁷⁶ In Erdoğan's rhetoric, this case became evidence for the obstruction of the national will by the elite or the old political establishment. He openly supported the investigation by saying that he was the prosecutor behind this operation when the main opposition party advocated the rights of the detainees.⁷⁷ This was followed by several other investigations by junta organizations, including *Balyoz*, *Sarkız*, *Kafes*, and *Eldiven*, in which many officers and high-ranking generals were arrested. Although the courts have not yet reached a verdict, the investigation's political fallout is felt across the country. The Office of the Chief of General Staff, which had been politically active in the first term of the JDP through announcements and even memorandums, seems to have been seized and placed under strict political control. This aspect of the investigations is praised by a group of analysts, claiming that it would lead to the consolidation of a pluralistic democracy in Turkey free from military

⁷⁶ For two alternative views see Akın Ünver, 'Turkey's Deep State and the Ergenekon Conundrum', *Middle East Institute Policy Brief*, 23, 29 April 2009, <http://www.mei.edu/content/turkey's-deep-state-and-ergenekon-conundrum> (accessed 23 June 2012); and Gareth H. Jenkins, 'Between Fact and Fantasy: Turkey's Ergenekon Investigation', *Silk Road Paper*, August 2009, <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/silkroadpapers/0908Ergenekon.pdf> (accessed 23 June 2012).

⁷⁷ *Radikal*, 16 July 2008.

interventions.⁷⁸ However, the impact of the investigations was not limited to political control over the armed forces. In this process, anti-JDP groups developed a fear of being associated with one of the junta investigations. Thus, secularist intellectuals claim that the government was the instigator of the investigations in order to silence or imprison any opposition to the JDP.

Another barrier to the fulfilment of the national will as defined by the prime minister was the mainstream media. In Erdoğan's second term in office unsupportive media groups were politically circumscribed as well. For instance, the largest media corporation, the Doğan Group, was slapped with a 3.8 billion lira (roughly US\$2.5 billion) tax penalty. Although the lawyers of the group never denied financial misconduct, this was the largest tax penalty ever issued in the history of the Republic and is seen by many to be punitive beyond any reasonable measures. Moreover, Erdoğan himself warned media bosses about editorials criticizing the government and threatened to hold them accountable for the journalistic invectives of their employees.⁷⁹

Finally, in 2010, constitutional amendments were passed to restructure the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors, the two other 'impeders' of the popular will, in ways that ostensibly reflect the choice of 'the people', that is, the governing party supported by the majority. Although opposition parties attempted to block the amendments, the government again took the issue to a referendum and again Erdoğan resorted to a populist campaign that divided society into 'the people' and 'the enemies of the people'. He claimed that opposition to the amendments was coming from a 'coalition of the evil' (*şer ittifakı*) including the opposition parties, some media institutions, NGOs and the PKK terror organization:

The RPP opposes the constitutional amendments. The NAP does as well. So does the PDP [Peace and Democracy Party]. Some media institutions are opposed to these amendments. The gangs, which hope to benefit from darkness, oppose them. The elite, who rely on the status quo, oppose a 'yes' vote, as does the terrorist organization [PKK]. What could be more evident?

⁷⁸ Emrullah Uslu, 'Turkish Domestic Politics in 2009: Towards Normalization', *Insight Turkey*, 12: 1 (2010), pp. 11–21.

⁷⁹ *Radikal*, 27 February 2010.

The RPP, NAP, PDP, YARSAV [the Union of Judges and Prosecutors], and the terrorist organization all came together against the people who say 'yes'. Can Turkey benefit from such a coalition? This is the question. These groups can never agree on any issue in Turkey. They run away from democracy and freedom. However, they agreed to oppose the amendments that will enlarge the people's horizons. This is a coalition of the evil.⁸⁰

Erdoğan also claimed the opposition was defending the older Constitution originally drafted by the military coup in 1982, because they disagree with the government's amendments. In one of the group meetings of the JDP in the Assembly, he burst into tears while reading the letters written by left- and right-wing militants just before they were executed by the military administration.⁸¹ He concluded by saying, 'our people will bury the constitution of the coup makers in the referendum,'⁸² and that those who voted against the amendments would be labelled as coup-lovers.⁸³ He thereby aimed to reach out to old dissidents of the regime – that is, the anti-communist militants of the NAP, the leftists, the liberals and the conservatives – by creating an imaginary unity among 'the people'. For him, the amendments were not a JDP project but 'a countrywide national aspiration'.⁸⁴

Meanwhile, the government strongly pressurized NGOs to express their support for the amendments. For example, Erdoğan urged the president of TUSIAD, the largest and most influential business association, to make the association's position clear because 'those who remain neutral today, on an issue related to the national benefit, will be neutralized tomorrow'.⁸⁵ Similarly, the government asked TOBB, the Union of Chambers of Commerce, to publicly support the amendments.⁸⁶ The amendments also became an element of negotiations with the unions, such as the public workers' unions, KESK and KAMUSEN.⁸⁷ Either by populist or by authoritative means the government managed to convince the majority of the voters. On 12 September 2010, 58 per cent of the participants voted in favour of the

⁸⁰ *Hürriyet*, 1 August 2010.

⁸¹ *Zaman*, 21 July 2010.

⁸² *Star*, 13 July 2010.

⁸³ *Zaman*, 9 September 2010.

⁸⁴ *Zaman*, 21 July 2010.

⁸⁵ *Radikal*, 18 August 2010.

⁸⁶ *Radikal*, 20 August 2010.

⁸⁷ *Radikal*, 18 August 2010.

amendments.⁸⁸ The immediate outcome was the election of the Ministry of Justice's list of candidates to the Supreme Board. In addition, the change in the profile of the Constitutional Court members from strict Kemalism to conservatism was also expected to accelerate after the amendments. The amendments were welcomed by liberal, conservative and religious intellectuals because they perceived them as progressive steps towards the liberalization of the judicial system.⁸⁹ Not surprisingly, secularists are now worried that this process will lead to JDP control of the judiciary.

As a result, Prime Minister Erdoğan managed to win the hearts and votes of the masses, and the 2010 referendum also revealed that popular support for the party is still on the rise. However, these consecutive electoral victories have given the JDP government an illusion of unlimited power. Although the JDP sustained economic stability and implemented several democratization reforms during its first term (2002–7), the degree of tolerance for the opposition seems to be declining in Turkey since 2007.⁹⁰ After the presidential election crisis, the institutions that are perceived to be potential threats to the government are either politically constrained or restructured in such ways as to operate in line with the government's will rather than as a check and balance to it. As Fehmi Koru, a liberal Islamist journalist once stated, 'Erdoğan came to power resembling Barack Obama but he began to look more like George W. Bush in office.'⁹¹ As the country moved towards another general election in 2011, a 'with-us-or-against-us' mentality seemed to prevail in Turkey's politics, justified by a populist discourse.

⁸⁸ Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, 'Turkish Referendum: Divided We Stand', *Analysis on Turkey*, German Marshall Fund of the United States, 17 September 2010.

⁸⁹ An important aspect of Turkey's politics during the last decade has been the alliance between liberals and Islamist conservatives against the Kemalist political establishment. See Halil M. Karaveli, 'An Unfulfilled Promise of Enlightenment: Kemalism and its Liberal Critics', *Turkish Studies*, 11: 1 (2010), pp. 85–102.

⁹⁰ Relying on World Values Survey data, Yeşilada and Noordijk claim that rising religiosity and intolerance in Turkey can be traced back to 1995 and that they have become more visible under the JDP. See Birol A. Yeşilada and Peter Noordijk, 'Changing Values in Turkey: Religiosity and Tolerance in Comparative Perspective', *Turkish Studies*, 11: 1 (2010), pp. 9–27.

⁹¹ NTVMSNBC, 6 November 2008, <http://arsiv.ntvmsnbc.com/news/464982.asp> (accessed 30 October 2010).

CONCLUSION

This article started with a discussion about the political identity of the reformist group within the Welfare Party, which later founded the Justice and Development Party. As pragmatic politicians, the reformists zigzagged between neo-liberalism and Islamism when they were elected to the Assembly in 2002. Secularists perceive these political manoeuvres as dissimulation (*takiyye*), that is, hiding the Islamist agenda until the time is appropriate for it to be disclosed. From a secularist point of view, the JDP went public with its Islamist intentions with its insistence on the election of a 'religious president' from among the ranks of the party by relying solely on holding the majority of the seats in the Assembly. However, the opposition managed to block the election by appealing to the Constitution, which urged majority parties to seek a consensus with the opposition. This blockade afforded the JDP leadership an opportunity to adopt a populist strategy that resulted in a call for an early general election and a referendum.

In order to study this populist strategy, the symptomatic propositions put forward by Panizza are preferred over other alternative theoretical perspectives, including empiricism and historicism. The symptomatic approach serves the purposes of this study well because it frees itself from the temporal and spatial bonds inherent in alternative approaches by analysing the discourse of populist leaders. By employing a symptomatic analysis, we can see how the JDP utilized an institutional crisis to polarize the society into two antagonistic groups. With this insight we are in a better position to comprehend the attitude not only of the populist politicians, but their constituency as well.

With this interpretive framework, an analysis of the discourse articulated by Prime Minister Erdoğan leads us to the conclusion that the JDP has adopted a populist strategy throughout the presidential election process and thereafter. During this time, Erdoğan has continually appealed to the masses with an anti-institutional discourse that divides society into 'the people' and 'the elite'. He also resumed this populist strategy when he had to avoid checks and balances from other branches of government and the opposition, thereby fulfilling the criteria of populism according to the symptomatic approach.