

# AK PARTY

## YEARS IN TÜRKİYE

**DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN POLICY**



Editors

Kılıç B. Kanat

Burhanettin Duran

SETA

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BURHANETTİN DURAN

SETA

## Kılıç B. Kanat

Kılıç Buğra Kanat is the Research Director at the SETA Foundation at Washington DC. He is also an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Penn State University, Erie. Dr. Kanat received his PhD in Political Science from Syracuse University; a Master's degree in Political Science from Syracuse University; and a Master's in International Affairs from Marquette University. He was awarded the Outstanding Research Award and Council of Fellows Faculty Research Award at Penn State, Erie in 2015. He previously participated in the Future Leaders program of Foreign Policy Initiative. Dr. Kanat's writings have appeared in Foreign Policy, Insight Turkey, The Diplomat, Middle East Policy, Arab Studies Quarterly, Mediterranean Quarterly, Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies, and Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs. He is a columnist at Daily Sabah. He is the author of A Tale of Four Augusts: Obama's Syria Policy. He is also co-editor of edited volumes History, Politics and Foreign Policy in Turkey, Change and Adaptation in Turkish Foreign Policy, and Politics and Foreign Policy in Turkey: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives.

## Burhanettin Duran

Burhanettin Duran received his BA in Political Science and International Relations from Bogazici University in 1993, and his Ph.D. in Political Science from Bilkent University in 2001. He was a visiting scholar at George Mason University in 2010-2011. Prof. Duran has been focusing on the transformation of Islamism, Turkish Political Thought, Turkish Domestic Politics, Turkish Foreign Policy and Middle Eastern Politics. Currently Prof. Duran is a professor at Social Sciences University of Ankara and General Coordinator of SETA Foundation. On 09th October 2018, Prof. Duran was appointed as member of Turkish Presidency Security and Foreign Policies Council.

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SETA Publications

Nenehatun Caddesi No: 66 GOP Çankaya 06700 Ankara Türkiye

Tel: +90 312.551 21 00 | Fax : +90 312.551 21 90

[www.setav.org](http://www.setav.org) | [kitap@setav.org](mailto:kitap@setav.org)

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## PREFACE

The AK Party experience represents a major transformation of our beloved country, Türkiye, as a major democratic power in its region and globally. Our party's success over the past two decades owes itself to the fact that we have always listened to demands and aspirations of our citizens. We have always believed that we needed to serve the needs of our people. Our people's dreams and aspirations inspired us and guided our strategy.

We have always tied our party's political destiny to the will of our people. We have always believed in the supremacy of the national will that guided us through troubled times. As millions of our citizens entrusted us with the stewardship of their democratic choices, in election after election, we were determined to never let them down. The engine of AK Party's success has been nothing other than the manifestation of the popular will.

We believe that the success story of this great nation of ours has only started. We have been privileged and felt humbled to be the servants of our country in the cause of justice and equity. Our principled and uncompromising stance on the fulfillment of democratic will of the people has ensured the protection and strengthening of our institutions despite various threats against our democracy. We know that our people's determination is our guarantee against dark forces.

I would like to congratulate the SETA Foundation and the editors of this volume for producing such an important volume on the AK Party years. This book analyzes the domestic and foreign policy challenges we have faced over the past two decades in addition to shedding light on some of the less known issues. It is not only a unique contribution to the literature on Turkish political history but also a fundamental reference for researchers and opinion makers.

It is no secret that the story of our nation's struggle for democracy and its rightful place at the global stage is an under-researched topic. We often see that far too many researchers, specialists, and opinionmakers fail to spare enough time to learn



about our great country. This unfortunately paves the way for superficial analyses and lazy commentaries. I hope this volume and others in the future will at least remedy some of these deficiencies in the literature.

Turkish political history is not important only for a better understanding of our country. It is just as important to make sense of the geopolitical dynamics in multiple regions such as the Middle East, the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, the Balkans, and the South Caucasus. It is not simply because of our country's geopolitical location but, more importantly, as a function of our country's ties with and critical importance for the destiny of these regions.

Türkiye has never been an isolated country. It is neither possible nor desirable for our people. We believe in common destiny with friendly nations and our neighbors. This is not simply about geography; it is a reflection of our people's aspirations. Turkish nation understands that they have a historic role to play in this region and securing peace and stability is in their national interest. As the AK Party, we have designed our foreign policy according to this perspective.

Over the years, we have experienced major regional challenges including terrorism, wars, civil conflict, economic crises, human displacement, effects of climate change among others. We have also experienced the best examples of humanity in the form of kindness, humanitarian help, mobilization in national disasters, cooperation, and simply affection and love for another. We have always believed in the goodness of our people to overcome any challenges.

In the past two decades, at every critical turn, Turkish people have opted for democracy and supremacy of their national will. They refused to give into any tutelary forces or anti-democratic putschists who tried to subvert our democracy. They have repeatedly recognized our party's unshakable commitment to the will of the people by giving us the privilege to serve them. We have always tried to live up to their expectations and will continue to do so.

We have also witnessed the regional turbulations that threatened the stability and peace in our region as well as within our borders. Once again, our people taught us that our unity and determination to overcome these challenges was our greatest asset. In the face of civil wars, terrorism and unprecedented human displacement, Turkish people showed their ability to contribute to a more peaceful future in our region.

The AK Party's story is Türkiye's story. Our struggle for justice, equity and peace is the struggle of our nation. For us, working in the service of our nation's aspirations is not a political choice nor is it limited to the formal mechanisms of a

political party. The AK Party's political success is not a cause but an effect of this commitment. Those who think in terms of simple political machinations and short-term calculations will fail to appreciate the meaning of our approach.

I recognize the challenge of analyzing the story of AK Party over two decades within the confines of a book. Once again, I want to commend the contributors and editors of this volume for this monumental effort. I recommend this book for anyone who is interested in a thoughtful analysis of our party and the dramatic transformation of our country over the AK Party years. I hope that this study will inspire many others and the story of our nation's democratic journey will be better understood by contemporaries and future generations alike.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan  
*President of Türkiye and AK Party Chairman*



## TRANSFORMATION OF TÜRKİYE DURING THE RULE OF THE AK PARTY

KILIÇ BUĞRA KANAT\*

BURHANETTİN DURAN\*\*

November 2020 marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the AK Party's rise to power in Türkiye. 20 years ago, the newly formed AK Party won a surprising victory in the general elections. The major political parties, including the parties of the coalition government, failed to surpass the ten percent threshold to gain entry into parliament, resulting in major parliamentary gains for the AK Party. Since then, it has won consecutive electoral victories and has ruled in Türkiye for the last 20 years, an unprecedented reality in Türkiye's history of multiparty democracy.

In this period, Türkiye has undergone a very unique transformation in its domestic and foreign affairs. Domestically, a series of political reforms were instituted under different AK Party governments. The first comprehensive peace process was launched in order to resolve the Kurdish problem, a significant transformation took place in terms of civil-military relations, important constitutional amendments were achieved, the governmental system was changed from a parliamentary system to an executive presidential one, the headscarf ban that had become a thorny issue for decades was abolished and the Turkish economy grew rapidly in this period.

However, this transformation was hardly a smooth one. AK Party governments during this period faced significant challenges as well. Some elements of the establishment in Türkiye, including the judiciary and military, challenged the rule of the democratically elected government at times. The Constitutional Court heard a case to shut down the AK Party and the military released an e-memorandum in

\* Research Director, SETA D.C.

\*\* Prof. Dr., General Coordinator, SETA & Social Sciences University of Ankara

order to force the government to capitulate. The failure of the peace process following the resumption of the attacks by the PKK brought a new wave of attacks and a spiral of violence from the seasoned fighters of the group. Both al-Qaida and DAESH organized deadly attacks in Türkiye. After consecutive electoral victories, AK Party has become the dominant party which led to the rise of party consolidation as well as the political polarization in the country. With the Gezi Park protests, opposition groups started to frequently utilize street politics, and, during the July 15th coup attempt, the Fetullahist Terrorist Organization (FETÖ) who had infiltrated different institutions in the government declared a total war against the AK Party government. This coup attempt has become one of the most serious and dramatic incidents of the last 20 years.

The AK Party governments also faced significant challenges and opportunities in their foreign affairs. The beginning of the accession negotiations with the EU, the abandonment of the non-interference policy towards the Middle East and increasing visibility of Türkiye in different continents, the increasing proactive role of Ankara in international organizations, and increasing economic diplomacy were the high points of the AK Party's foreign policy. During this period, Türkiye became a major contributor to numerous international humanitarian programs. In addition to hosting more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees, Türkiye also sends humanitarian assistance to groups, such as Rohingya Muslims and Somali, and is actively involved in conflict resolution programs in different parts of the world. However, AK Party governments still face significant challenges. The conflict in Syria has exported insecurity to Türkiye, while the 2003 invasion of Iraq triggered all the ethnic, sectarian fault lines in the region, and the 2014 invasion of Crimea generated major tension in Türkiye's northern neighborhood. The relations between Türkiye and the US and Türkiye and Russia went through major highs and lows during this period, demonstrating significant instability in Türkiye's relations with superpowers. While AK Party governments were being tested by these challenges, the region around Türkiye and the international system also went through a serious evolution. Civil wars, the emergence of failed states and instability throughout the Middle East, and debates about the transformation of the international system.

While approaching the centenary of its foundation, Türkiye's transformation cannot be fully understood without a thorough analysis of the AK Party era. The 20 year-long government of the AK Party brought significant political, constitutional, and social changes to Türkiye. This transformation of Türkiye also deeply

impacted the surrounding neighborhood. Türkiye has become a relevant actor that needs to be studied and understood in the conflicts and crisis in the region, including the civil war in Syria and Iraq, the fight against DAESH, as well as the crisis in the European Union regarding the rise of far-right populism.

Especially in the last few years, due to Türkiye's increasing involvement in regional affairs and the developments within Türkiye, international observers are becoming increasingly interested in the country. Türkiye related news and analysis occupies academic journals and magazines with increasing frequency and volume. There is a large number of articles and analyses written on the AK Party and its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. However, most of these studies neglect the structural particularities, social dynamics, and international context. This book intends to fill an important gap in a timely fashion and aims to provide a more comprehensive follow up of the previous studies in this field.

The book aims to shed light on key issue areas in Turkish politics and the developments in this field during the AK Party period. In addition to the issues mentioned above, considering the predominance of Erdoğan as a political character during this period, his leadership style and patterns will also be analyzed. So far, the AK Party as a political party has been discussed as the gathering of a politically and socially homogenous group of people. However, this book will provide an insight to the coalition of groups that form the AK Party. This perception of homogeneity was also relevant for the temporal dimension. The AK Party is not a party that represents an unchanging political group, but is a party whose approaches and policies evolved over the past 20 years. The book intends to cover this transformation as well. There will also be a separate section within the book on the July 15th coup attempt of 2016, which is still very much understudied and neglected.





FIRST

TRANSFORMATION OF  
DOMESTIC POLITICS  
DURING THE AK PARTY ERA







## CHAPTER 1

# THE AK PARTY'S IDEOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION

BURHANETTİN DURAN\*

The identity and ideology of the Justice and Development Party (Adelet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AK Party), which came to power just one year after its establishment and has ruled Türkiye for 20 consecutive years, and more importantly, its transformation, has been the subject of heated debate. At home and abroad, there is an ongoing discussion about where the AK Party “wants to take Türkiye”. In this regard, a number of ideologically charged criticisms have been voiced over the years. The most extreme lines of criticism include the accusation that the movement was a sub-contractor of Washington’s “Greater Middle East Project” and the charge that Türkiye was turning its back on the West to join the Eurasian axis. It is important to note that the same critics identify the AK Party in various ways, describing it as “democratic Islamist,” “religious authoritarian,” “counter-revolutionary” and “religious Kemalist”. In the wake of the 2009 World Economic Summit in Davos, Switzerland and the 2010 Mavi Marmara incident, the AK Party was charged with “returning to Islamism” and “taking an authoritarian turn”. Since the 2013 Gezi Park protests, that narrative became commonplace in the Western media. Amidst those accusations, how the AK Party views its actions vis-a-vis its political platform and identity references is often ignored.

There is no doubt that the movement, whose self-declared goal is to create a “new Türkiye,” has brought about various changes in Turkish politics during its long tenure in power. Those changes are often discussed with reference to the AK Party’s position vis-à-vis ideological positions, such as Islamism, nationalism and Kemalism. Needless to say, it is necessary to discuss those changes with an eye on policies related

\* Prof. Dr., General Coordinator, SETA & Social Sciences University of Ankara

to coming to terms with Kemalist modernism, the Turkish republic's founding ideology, the future of Türkiye's relations with the Western alliance, interactions with the Islamic world and the Middle East, and Türkiye's domestic issues.

Under successive AK Party governments, which overcame a number of major crises including the 2007 presidential crisis and the July 15, 2016 coup attempt, traditional avenues of Turkish politics underwent critical transformations. Over the course of 20 years, the comprehensive transformation regarding civil-military relations, the relationship between politics and religion, and the political system's reformation created new challenges and problems – which could be the subject of a large body of academic literature.

In this regard, this article has a more limited objective. It analyzes the ideological references and identity discourses employed by the AK Party in its efforts to shape and implement policies to transform Türkiye. In doing so, it takes into account how policy changes caused by international and regional developments and realities transform the movement's ideological discourse – with regard to change and continuity.

This article's main argument is that the AK Party relies on three interrelated discourses depending on circumstantial needs without fully adopting or abandoning any specific one: *conservative democracy*, *our civilization* and the *native-national* (*yerli-milli*). It is possible to argue that all three discourses, which represent the movement's responses to challenges over the past 20 years, rested on pragmatic and strong leadership.

The AK Party's ideological transformation corresponds to the movement's confrontation with challenges, three past and one current. Past challenges include (a) the National Outlook movement, of which many AK Party founders were members; (b) Kemalism, which shaped the Republican period; and (c) the regional order, which was born out of World War I and transformed by the Arab revolts.<sup>1</sup> It is possible to argue that the AK Party today faces a number of realities, including the post-Arab Spring chaos in the Middle East, efforts by the great powers to redesign the region and the power struggle between regional powers. We could add to that list the AK Party coming to terms with its own performance – vis-a-vis the July 15, 2016 coup attempt and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's pledge to “build Türkiye's century”.

<sup>1</sup> Burhanettin Duran, “Understanding the AK Party's Identity Politics: The Multi-Layered Civilization Discourse and Its Limits”, *Insight Turkey*, Vol: 15, No: 1, (2013).

Taking into consideration *conservative democracy*, *our civilization* and *native-national* in the ideological and political framework of those four confrontations, it becomes clear that the AK Party has been re-blending the various ideological currents of Ottoman-Turkish modernization: Islamism, nationalism, Westernism and Ottomanism.<sup>2</sup> The concepts and symbols of those political traditions are united around the idea of the *national (millilik)* with a level of dynamism required by changing circumstances. The AK Party seemed pro-Western when Türkiye had a real opportunity to integrate into the European Union. During the Arab revolts, the country stressed the importance of the *ummah*, or “community,” and being labeled as “Middle Eastern”. Finally, the movement has been described as “nationalist” as it underlined the themes of “unity, state and nation” while intensifying the struggle against terrorist organizations such as the Fetullahist Terrorist Organization (FETÖ) and the PKK, especially after the July 15 coup attempt. In this sense, the AK Party tends to highlight certain points as required by the times without abandoning others.

Primarily, this article stresses the shared roots of the AK Party’s references to identity and ideology since its establishment and the extent to which they changed over time.

Secondly, it concentrates on the idea of *conservative democracy*, the circumstances under which it was shaped and the policies it informed.

Thirdly, it focuses on the discourse of *our civilization*, which was adopted by a confident AK Party amid the Arab Spring revolts.

Finally, this study engages in a discussion of the concept of *native-national*, a discourse that emerged in response to the turbulence of recent years. It questions whether the adoption of this discourse, which was born out of a sense of being under attack and made references to “survival,” means that the AK Party became “pro-state” or “nationalist”.

## **“CONSERVATIVE DEMOCRACY”: A SEARCH FOR HARMONY AND INTEGRATION**

Established in 2001, the AK Party set out to develop a new approach to politics. To be clear, the idea of “conservative democracy,” which features prominently in public speeches by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, did not exist in ear-

<sup>2</sup> Malik Müfti, “The AK Party’s Islamic Realist Political Vision: Theory and Practice”, *Politics and Governance*, Vol: 2, No: 2, (2014), pp. 28-42.

**T**he AK Party years in Türkiye have been truly transformational. When the party was established in 2001, the country was going through major economic and political crises. Today, under the leadership of President Erdoğan, Türkiye is a middle power with serious global ambitions. In the nearly two decades since its inception, the AK Party has been confronted with major domestic and foreign policy challenges. At home, major improvements in religious freedoms, ethnic relations, and cultural rights have been realized. Abroad, Türkiye has emerged as a major power to reckon with in the region while playing a role as a critical partner in global issues. From tackling the Kurdish issue to daring to take on authoritarian regimes during the Arab Spring, the AK Party under President Erdoğan's leadership has already left the most significant mark on Turkish modern political history.

This volume addresses the domestic and foreign policy transformations in Türkiye that took place over the course of the past two decades under the AK Party.

