

The Turkish Right and the Republican People's Party- The Case of 1977 General Elections

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Abstract

The definition of ideological cleavage in Turkish political life through the concepts of right and left began with the orientation of the Republican People's Party to the Left of Center in the 1960s. This separation evolved into a deep polarization and social crisis that would turn into a low-intensity civil war during the 1970s. The 1977 General Elections were held in this crisis atmosphere. In this framework, the political characteristics of the period within the scope of our study have been tried to be scrutinized through the right-left divergence. This thesis aims to analyze the points of convergence and divergence in the discourses of right-wing politics in Türkiye towards the RPP in the context of the 1977 elections. In that regard, the Justice Party, the National Salvation Party, and the Nationalist Movement Party were chosen as the subjects of our study, representing different ideologies of Turkish Right. The study's scope will be limited to the parties' official discourses: election campaign documents, radio speeches of party elites, and statements of party leaders, which will be evaluated.

Keywords: Justice party; national salvation party; nationalist movement party; republican people's party; the 1977 general elections; the turkish right

INTRODUCTION

In certain periods of Turkish political history, political confrontations emerging for various reasons are very common. After the Second Constitutional Monarchy, when political life took on a modern face, the political struggle in the Ottoman period, which was shaped by factions within the palace, the army, and the ulema shifted its main axis of polarization to the confrontation between the Committee of Union and Progress and the Freedom and Accord Party. In the Republican era, the political and cultural face of polarization became more pronounced. Due to the limited possibilities of political opposition to the Kemalist regime during the Single Party period, there were various attempts to organize a substantive political opposition, but no significant political line emerged. After 1946, when the multi-party system was introduced, politics were reshaped on two major fronts. With the establishment of the Democrat Party by a group that had left the Republican People's Party (RPP), those who opposed the RPP's political and cultural transformation during the one-party period positioned themselves against the RPP. The Democrat-Populist front was the main determinant of the politics of the 1950s. This divergence, which had deeper political, social, and cultural aspects beyond the rivalry between the two political parties, established a line of political deviation whose legacy would last for years to come. The developments of the 1960s quickly politicized the masses, deepening ideological polarization and social divisions. The distinction between left and right entered Turkish political life in 1965 when the RPP declared itself to be a party to the "Left of Center".

The emergence of the left-right divide in Turkish political life occurred in the 1960s. In the environment of freedom provided by the 1961 Constitution, leftist ideas flourished again, the political influence of the working class increased, and the Workers' Party of Türkiye, a socialist party, entered the parliament. All these developments triggered the "Left of Center" movement in the RPP. The emergence of the left as a powerful actor in the political arena contributed to the right-wing parties defining themselves through anti-leftism. This constituted the political root of the left-right polarization that began in the second half of the 1960s and continued throughout the 1970s, becoming increasingly bitter. While the terms 'left' and 'right' were rarely used previously, they became a regular part of daily political discussions between 1965 and 1980. The elections in 1977 were the pinnacle of this polarization. Therefore, this study aims to understand and discuss the perspectives and

discourses of various actors on the Turkish right towards the RPP during the 1977 elections, an important period in Türkiye's political history.

The 1977 General Elections

The 1977 elections were the ninth free general parliamentary elections in Turkish political history. The eight parties participating in the elections were as follows, according to the order on the ballot paper: the Republican People's Party (RPP), the Turkish Unity Party (TUP), the Republican Reliance Party, the Nationalist Movement Party (NMP), the Justice Party (JP), the Democratic Party, the Workers' Party of Türkiye (WPT), the National Salvation Party (NSP) (Cumhuriyet, April 26, 1977). The JP, the NSP, the NMP, and the Republican Reliance Party participated in the elections as partners of the Nationalist Front government. The Republican Reliance Party, founded by those who left the RPP due to its leftward orientation, was close to a right-wing Kemalist position (Bora & Taşkın, 2021, pp. 536-537). The Democratic Party, founded by those who broke away from the JP, was, in the words of its leader Ferruh Bozbeyle, "the Democratic Right." During the formation of the First Nationalist Front government, some of the party founders returned to the JP due to internal disagreements (Dağı & Uğur, 2009, pp. 371-374). The Democratic Party entered the elections in a very weak position due to this fragmented structure. On the other side of the political spectrum were the RPP, the WPT, and the TUP. The WPT was the far left-wing of the parties participating in the elections, but it was not as strong as it had been in the 1960s. Meanwhile, the TUP was a social democratic party that appealed mostly to Alawite citizens. The TUP managed to win eight parliamentary seats in the 1969 elections, in which it participated for the first time, but this number was reduced to one in the 1973 elections.

The rationale for the decision to hold early elections was the economic and political crisis in the country. The decision to hold early elections sparked debate within the government of the Nationalist Front. This means that the right-wing parties went into these elections with a serious disagreement among themselves. These debates are also reflected in the election campaigns of the parties. This was a period of extreme ideological polarization. The struggle between the parties in the elections is based entirely on ideological

polarization. The right-wing bloc, mainly the Justice Party, the National Salvation Party, and the Nationalist Movement Party, was competing with the left bloc led by the RPP. The 1977 elections can be said to have been the elections that best reflected ideological differences. In this respect, it provides valuable material for analyzing the discourses of the parties.

Left and Right

Left and right are terms used to describe the political views and beliefs of political parties and movements that determine their ideological stance. In the political science literature, the distinction between left and right usually dates back to the French Revolution. The terms left and right were developed in reference to the seating arrangement adopted at the first General Assembly meeting in 1789. On the left side of the assembly hall sat radicals in favor of equality and change, while on the right side were moderates and aristocrats opposed to revolutionary ideas. (Tunçay, 1991, p. 17) Based on this event, the term ‘left’ simply refers to the transformation of the existing order and revolutionism, whereas ‘right’ refers to those who defend the existing order in the face of revolutionary demands. Of course, the distinction between left and right has become much more complicated over time, no longer reflecting a preference between those in favor of revolution and those in favor of maintaining the existing order. The impact of the difficult working conditions of the Industrial Revolution on the masses broadened the content of political struggles and gave a social class understanding to the left-right distinction on the axis of the labor-capital contradiction. The working class emerged as an important actor on the historical stage during this period, and with the emergence of the Marxist system of thought, class movements became one of the main dynamics of the left-right divide. By the end of the 19th century, it was observed that there are now effective and powerful political movements in Europe that could be classified as either left-wing or right-wing (Hobsbawm, 2003). Although the various left and right movements that have emerged in different regions throughout history have certain differences, it is possible to mention some universal values that one can identify with these two terms. These values, according to the Italian thinker Norberto Bobbio, are equality, freedom, solidarity, and revolutionism for the left. The values of the right are traditionalism, loyalty to the established order, and elitism

(Bobbio, 1999). Bobbio argues that the attitude towards the idea of equality is the criterion to define the left and the right, and the attitude towards the ideal of freedom is the criterion to defining the moderates and extremists of both sides. According to Bobbio, the radical left can be characterized by both egalitarianism and authoritarianism, while the radical right can be characterized by opposition to both freedom and equality. The center-left is egalitarian and libertarian; the center-right is libertarian but anti-egalitarian (1999, p. 124). Andrew Heywood argues that the left-right spectrum narrowly summarizes different attitudes toward the role of the state in the economy, while emphasizing that the terms left and right do not have precise meanings. The left favors government intervention in the economy and collective views that prioritize society, whereas the right favors the market and individualism. Moreover, ideas such as freedom, fraternity, rights, progress, reform, and internationalism are often seen as having a left-wing character. On the other hand, beliefs such as authority, hierarchy, order, tradition, reaction, and nationalism are often identified with the right-wing (Heywood, 2015, p. 119).

In order to analyze the discourses of various actors on the Turkish right against the RPP, it is necessary to define the characteristics of right-wing movements in Türkiye, their differences, and common grounds. At this point, Tanıl Bora's original evaluations of the Turkish right are worth mentioning. Bora considered nationalism, conservatism, and Islamism, the main elements of the Turkish right, as transformable states. In this framework, he considered nationalism, which he defined not only as an ideology but also as a pattern of mentality, as the grammar of the Turkish right. He attributed the power to create contents, concepts, and images mainly to nationalism. According to Bora, nationalism is the "solid form" of the Turkish right. On the other hand, Islamism is the source of images, values, and rituals for the Turkish right; it is the Turkish right's "liquid form." Bora also saw conservatism beyond content and mentality patterns and defined it as a state of mind, a posture, a style. Conservatism is the "air" of the Turkish right (Bora, 2017, pp. 8-9). Accordingly, the Turkish right should be considered to be a concept used to express the blend of nationalism, conservatism, and Islamism. It should be emphasized that there is an intertwined relationship between these three.

The rise of the left in the 1960s paved the way for the clarification of the right-wing movement in the conjuncture created by the Cold War. During this time, the Turkish right was shaped as an anti-leftist reactionary discourse. The nationalist-conservative discourse, sown in the 1950s and flourishing in the 1960s to draw the ideological coordinates of the Turkish right, and the anti-leftist tendencies and perceptions that persisted throughout the 1970s, became the common ground of the Turkish right. Tanıl Bora emphasized the RPP's turn to the left as the milestone of the left-right divergence in Türkiye. In the 1965 elections, the Justice Party campaigned against the RPP's "Left of Center" slogan with the slogan "Left of Center is the Road to Moscow" (2016, p. 13). The Turkish right's accusations linking the RPP to communism during the period of increasing political polarization in the 1970s have their origins in this period. The Justice Party, which emerged as a center-right party embracing the legacy of the Democrat Party, was a kind of right-wing confederation that incorporated all elements against the left. The JP started to lose this characteristic as a result of some developments starting from the late 1960s. Hereby, in the 1970s, the Islamist right and the nationalist right were organized as independent movements and became important political actors. Throughout the 1970s, the Justice Party, the National Salvation Party, and the Nationalist Movement Party were concrete manifestations of the ideological positioning of the Turkish right. On the other hand, although these different poles of the right were organized as separate parties, they were able to unite against a common enemy. The Nationalist Front governments were precisely a manifestation of this unity. Although there were numerous factors that brought different elements of the Turkish right together, the main reason was undoubtedly the perception of the rising left as a threat to the Turkish right. This was also a period when the Turkish right was on the rise in terms of ideology, organization, and popularization, with the main motivation uniting the various currents of the right being opposition to the left.

One of the main motivations of the Turkish right is the struggle against the rising left and the other is the reaction to modernization. According to Yüksel Taşkın, the nature of the left-right polarization was determined by the authoritarian institutionalization of Republican modernization (Taşkın, 2009, pp. 452-453). Nuray Mert also claims that right-wing politics in Türkiye was created in reaction to the Republican Revolution (Mert, 2007,

p. 98). Indeed, there are signs of a reaction to the one-party era in Turkish right-wing discourse. The reactionary discourses of the Turkish right in general demonstrate that Kemalist policies were perceived as opening the door to communism. This phenomenon is undeniably reflected in the discourses of the actors in our study. Leaving aside the discourses arising from the current political goals of the period, we observe that the discourses of the Turkish right against the RPP unite under two main themes: The first is anti-communist political discourse, which associated the RPP with communism and accused the RPP of serving communism as a result of the period's rising leftist movements. The second is the discourse constructed with references to the single-party era as a reflection of a reaction against Republican modernization.

Method

The main purpose of the study is to analyze the points of convergence and divergence in the discourses of right-wing politics in Türkiye towards the RPP in the context of the 1977 elections. In that regard, the Justice Party, the National Salvation Party, and the Nationalist Movement Party were chosen as the subjects of our study, representing the different ideologies of Turkish Right. The study's scope will be limited to the parties' official discourses: election campaign documents, radio speeches of party leaders, and statements of party leaders, which will be evaluated. Official documents from parties, such as election manifestos, election brochures, and slogan booklets will be scrutinized. The texts published by the Prime Ministry in printed form will be used to monitor speeches made on the radio by individuals designated by the parties as part of official campaigns. For leader statements, the identified newspapers will be used. In this context, the newspapers *Son Havadis*, *Hergün* and *Millî Gazete*, which adopted different ideological attitudes and editorial policies within the right-wing view, were selected. *Son Havadis* was close to the Justice Party, *Hergün* to the NMP and *Millî Gazete* to the NSP. The newspapers chosen for this study were published between April 5, when the decision to hold early elections was made, and June 5, when the elections were held. Furthermore, secondary sources on Turkish political history, such as memoirs, various newspapers, and magazines from the time, particularly *Cumhuriyet*, were used to construct a historical framework.

RESULTS

Two main strategies can be observed in the 1977 election campaign of the Justice Party. The first of these was to identify the RPP, it's the biggest rival, with communism and portray it as a serious threat to the future of the country. Accordingly, an attitude was adopted that blamed the left and the leftist RPP for all kinds of problems in the country, especially the violence. The JP leadership also claimed that if the party came to power alone, the danger of communism and violence would be prevented. The JP's electoral strategy was to argue that the election was between the leftists and the nationalists and to vote for the JP, the strongest of the nationalist parties. In this regard, Demirel did not hold back from claiming that votes for the NSP, his biggest rival on the right, would benefit communism. The JP ran its election campaign with the claim of representing the right-wing by uniting conservative voters around its party. The other salient element was to reinforce its first strategy by emphasizing that it is the sole representative of the legacy of the Democrat Party, which is still a kind of legend in the imagination of the Turkish right. During the campaign, Demirel identified the JP with the DP in the 1950s. In this context, symbolic figures of the Democratic Party, especially former President Celal Bayar, were included in the election campaign. Accordingly, the aim was to consolidate the conservative-nationalist masses that opposed authoritarian modernization by emphasizing the RPP's single-party era.

The NSP's election campaign focused more on criticizing the JP, the largest party of the right. It can be said that the reason for this was to get votes from the JP's voter base or at least to protect the votes coming from there. In this context, the discourse that "the JP was essentially the same as the RPP" was mainly used. According to this, the only national party was the NSP. The leftist RPP and the "colorless" JP, which sided with the rich, were different elements of the "imitative mentality". It is also conceivable that Erbakan considered the possibility of re-entering a coalition with the RPP after the elections. After all, the RPP's anti-establishment program had similar elements with the NSP's economic views. On the other hand, the central theme in Erbakan's discourse against the RPP was the single-party era practices and the allegations that the RPP was imposing domination on religious citizens. The fierce anti-communism seen in the discourse of other right-wing

parties is visible in the NSP. The RPP is criticized for being leftist, but the NSP's anti-communism was more moderate. According to the NSP, the liberal capitalism represented by the JP in Türkiye is as alien to the Turkish nation as communism.

The RPP of the 1970s was a radical left-wing party for the NMP, and for the first time in Turkish political history, a radical left-wing party came first in the 1973 General Elections, came to power, albeit through a coalition, and had a prime minister. This situation alarmed the NMP like all other anti-communist sections in Turkish politics (Aytürk, 2020, p. 451). Starting from the second half of the 1970s, the NMP had shaped its political strategies based on this phenomenon. This was a strategy that aimed to consolidate the right-wing base as much as possible while escalating social tension through the left-right polarization (Bora & Can, 2019, p. 66). A possible RPP government had to be prevented at all costs. In this context, the NMP's election campaign, portraying the RPP as the communists' protector while attempting to distinguish itself from the JP and other right-wing parties. While doing so, the NMP emphasized its anti-capitalist ideology and claimed that "true nationalism was represented by the NMP" (Ağaoğulları, 2013, p. 351).

DISCUSSION

Before the 1977 elections, the Nationalist Front government of four right-wing parties was in power. Issues such as violence and political instability that emerged in the 1970s tended to escalate during the right-wing coalitions. Although there was a cleavage based on ideological differences in the parties on the right, they were united against the rising left. On the other side of the political spectrum, there was a strong reaction against the Nationalist Front Government and hope for an RPP government. Political life tended to be based on left-right opposition. The masses' turn towards the RPP, which they saw as the hope of the left, also mobilized right-wing groups who were worried about a leftist government. On the way to the 1977 General Elections, the political polarization and tension between the parties not only escalated to the highest level, but the country was dragged into a spiral of violence that it had never experienced before. Attacks on party rallies, assassination threats to the party leaders, and leaders accusing each other of being fascist, communist, and separatist have become the common practice in political life. Under these circumstances, those on both sides of the political spectrum were hopeful that a strong

government would emerge from the elections. However, hope did not come true and no single party came to power in the elections held on June 5, 1977. As a result of the elections, the RPP became the first party with 41.4 percent of vote, while the JP became the second party with 36.9 percent. The NSP received 8.6 percent and the NMP more than doubled its votes to 6.4 percent of vote (Cumhuriyet, June 8, 1977). Thus, following the elections, Türkiye entered a period of coalition governments that would last until September 12, 1980. During this period, the crisis deepened and the problems of the pre-1977 period increased exponentially.

CONCLUSION

The three parties whose discourses we examined in our study were participating in the election as partners of the Nationalist Front government. These parties generally pursued a policy of polarization in the elections and maintained harsh rhetoric throughout their campaigns that could escalate this polarization. In the 1977 General Elections, the parties of the right-wing spectrum had a common discourse in their approach to some fundamental issues. On the other hand, there were also some serious differences of opinion between the parties. These distinctions were also reflected in the discourse they used in the 1977 General Elections. The differences in the discourses of the political parties had ideological reasons as well as political strategies.

Entering the elections as the senior partner of the NF Government, the JP's main strategy was to marginalize the RPP by portraying it as more to the left than it actually was. The JP also accused his political rival on the right, the NSP, of bringing the left to power in the past and thus aimed to consolidate conservative voters around his party. During the campaign, Demirel, who enjoyed the support of former Democrat Party members, identified the JP with the DP era of the 1950s. The NSP placed religion at the center of its discourse in the elections. Erbakan, constructed its discourse by referring to the one-party period and stated that secularism under the RPP was perceived as non-believers persecuting believers. In the NSP's anti-RPP discourse, criticism of the single party period is more dominant than the theme of anti-communism. The other partner of the NF government, the NMP, like the JP, campaigned on the thesis that there was a threat of communism in

Türkiye and tried to consolidate conservative voters through opposition to the RPP, which was identified with communism. Therefore, in the 1977 election campaign, the JP and the NMP refrained from attacking each other and instead criticized Ecevit and RPP. On the other hand, the NSP, the other party on the right preferred to criticize the JP and Demirel rather than the RPP in its election campaign.

The most prominent theme in the discourse used by right-wing parties against the RPP was anti-communism. However, the content and tone of this discourse differed from one another. For example, the most prominent method followed in the campaigns of the JP and the NMP were to identify the left, and thus the RPP, with communism and portray it as a threat to the future of Türkiye. However, the NSP differed significantly from other right-wing parties in terms of its rhetoric towards the RPP. The violent anti-communist tone seen in the other two parties was absent in the NSP's rhetoric. It is also conceivable that NSP considered the possibility of re-entering a coalition with the RPP after the elections. One may argue that this has as much to do with the political calculations of the parties as the ideological background. Perhaps it is important to remember that if anti-communism is a very important characteristic of the Turkish right, pragmatism is another one. We may state the approach to the phenomenon of violence, one of the most important social problems of the period, as another example. The JP government alone was necessary to prevent violence and ensure political stability. The NSP, on the other hand, referred to violence less than the RPP and the JP. The NMP, on the other hand, saw the RPP, which patronized the communists and separatists, as the sole responsible for the violence. According to the NSP, the left was not solely responsible for the violence. The materialist AP mentality was as responsible as the left-wing RPP. The religious colouring in the discourse of the parties is another characteristic of the election campaign. It is observed that all three parties subject to our study used religious themes during the election campaign. This was also reflected in the parties' discourse against the RPP. All three right-wing parties used discourse against the practices of the single party era and the authoritarian modernization of the early Republic.

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