

BEYOND THE BALLOT BOX: TURKISH DEMOCRACY UNDER TENSION BETWEEN  
IDEALISM AND POPULISM

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Paper Prepared for Presentation at the Annual Conference of the Canadian Political Science Association , 1-3 June, 2010, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec.

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## Introduction

This paper inquires into the dilemmas of the democratization reforms in Turkey, a deeply divided polity along the secular-Islamic cleavage, during the current Justice and Development Party (AKP) government (2002-present). Consolidation of democracy has long emphasized the significance of elite-consensus on the procedural and substantive issues after transitions (Linz and Stepan, 1996). The problematique of elite-consensus over political reforms in Turkey has remained despite the positive influence of the EU accession process and the transformation of political Islam into a more moderate force in the party system with the rise of the AKP.

Significant progress in the economic and political transition process until the mid-1990s in Turkey was followed by political reforms oriented towards meeting the conditions set by the European Union for Turkey's prospective full membership. Meanwhile, Islamist actors went through a transformation to overcome their radicalism and to embrace democratization objectives. The November 2002 parliamentary elections with the stunning electoral victory of the AKP, which has been the major actor in this transformation, provided the necessary stability for the party system. Consolidation of democracy literature also underlines the stabilization of the party system and the integration of anti-systemic actors into the political system. However, besides the enactment of far-reaching reforms of the legal system in the context of the Europeanization process, increasing stability in the party system, and the moderation of the Islamic actors who came to power in 2002, majoritarianism rather than consensualism has pervaded political institutions in Turkey.

This paper inquires into the policies and the discourses of the AKP government toward the much disputed reforms pertaining to the electoral process, constitutional reform, protection of civil and political liberties, and fostering democratic accountability. It is contended that the democracy perspective of the AKP has been severely constrained due to its roots in both the populist Islamist parties preceding itself and the conservative center-right tradition in Turkey. Both the Islamist tradition and the conservative-right tradition which constitute an integral part of its identity suffers from a tension between their populist forms of mobilization and democracy conception, and an idealism in the sense of being an anti-establishment movement in the context of the prevailing center-periphery cleavage accentuated by the secular-Islamist conflict. The paper problematizes the AKP's strategy of situating itself at the centre to reconcile its Islamist baggage and the centre-right conservative populism by focusing on its selective approach to political reforms to deepen democratization.

With the coming of the AKP to power and the start of the accession negotiations with the EU in 2005 initiated a new era in Turkish democratization. While the sceptics and the secularist circles has continued to see it as an Islamist actor with a hidden agenda, its moderate rhetoric and its commitment to the economic agenda and democratization has also made most

analysts to place the party in the very same platform of the traditional centre-right parties in Turkey (Dağı,2008, Özbudun, 2006a, 2006b). However, its style of governance and policy agenda has made other observers to challenge its similarity with the dominant centre-right tradition in Turkish politics (Öniş,2009). It was argued that its structural dilemma stemming from its core support base in the religiously conservative groups has significantly constrained its initial flexibility and consensual approach especially after its second electoral victory in 2007. The analysis in this paper follows this line of argument and suggests that its backtracking from democratization reforms and from its objective of replacing the 1982 constitution needs to be comprehended in the context of the ideological-cultural forces shaping the party's democracy perspective in addition to its structural constraints. Although the AKP government refrained from direct clashes with the secular establishment, its approach to political reforms marked by its peculiar brand of conservative populism has deepened the prevailing divisions in the political and civil society, rather than moderating the conflicts and proceeding with the search for consensus in the party system which seem so essential for the consolidation of Turkish democracy.

#### The Lost Decade of the 1990s for Turkish Democratization: The Crisis of the Centre-Right and the Military Intervention of February ,1997

Parliamentary elections of December 1995 in Turkey was a turning point in the electoral decline of the center- right parties the Motherland Party (ANAP) and the True Path Party (DYP) and the center left parties SHP/CHP<sup>1</sup> due to economic mismanagement, corruption as well as the parties institutional problems. With the electoral rise of the RP<sup>2</sup> and the destabilization in the party system was indicative of the end of the strong majority governments since 1983. The coalition government formed in June 1996 between the DYP and the RP aggravated the tensions in the party system along the secular-Islamist polarization.

The Islamist RP (1993-1998) was the post-1983 reincarnation of the largest Islamist formation in the pre-coup period the National Salvation Party (MSP).<sup>3</sup> The cultural and the discursive hegemony of Kemalism upheld by the statist elites had made Republican secularism 'the basis of identity for *the white Turks*'. The ideology of the National Outlook Movement (NOM) provided a foundation for a rival identity for the Islamist members of *the black Turks* (Yavuz 2000) with its "anti--Westernism, anti-Europeanism and the promise of a community and state based on national and Islamic forces". The NOM held doctrinal articulation of the quest by conservative-peripheral groups to receive their share from modernization and development. In the 1980s Erbakan pragmatically embraced equal distribution of income as an objective with the discourse of the Just Order (Çinar and Duran, , 29). As an ideology of the periphery, blending Ottomanism, nationalism, modernism and Islamism, the NOM's original emphasis on ethics and industrialization was shifted in the 1980s to a focus on identity and justice (Yavuz, 2000). A major pillar of this tradition was the

<sup>1</sup> The major party of the left, the Social Democratic Populist Party (SHP) was replaced by the Republican People's Party (CHP) in 1995. The secularist CHP was the continuation of the pre-coup CHP which was originally Turkey's first party.

<sup>2</sup> The RP won 21 per cent of the total vote in the 1995 general elections.

<sup>3</sup> The MSP was closed in 1981 during the military regime along with the other political parties.

criticism of the centuries' old process of secularization and the westernizing elite in Turkey for preventing people's moral development, which in the National Outlook ideology, was a prerequisite for economic and political development. The "Just Order" rhetoric struck a responsive cord among the conservative sectors of the less developed areas and the hinterland of Anatolia threatened by the economic liberalization policies which plagued the middle-classes with rampant consumerism in the post-1980 Turkey.<sup>4</sup> The RP had a political transformation project by upholding a homogenous conception of the community. As an opposition ideology, however, it remained statist, and failed to become "an ideology of liberation" (Yavuz, 2000). Its defense of freedom and human rights prioritized religious freedoms over others 'with overtones of oppressive attitudes for other belief systems and minority groups' (Tanıyıcı,2003:470). As the only party in Turkish politics close to the mass party model (Özbudun, 2001), the RP's major strength lied in its superb organization and grass- roots mobilization rather than ideology (White 2002,274). Meanwhile, the centre-parties of the conservative right ANAP and the DYP were plagued with an identity crisis in the 1990s which was deepened after the changes of leadership in both parties. (Cizre 1996: 142-43).

On 28 February 1997 in its highly stressful and extended meeting, the military wing of the National Security Council (MGK)<sup>5</sup> presented the coalition government with a programme of eighteen proposals with the objective of controlling the spread of religious reactionary forces and the spread of fundamentalism arguably heartened by the words and the deeds of the RP. Largely due to the party's concern to be responsive to the grassroots demands, Erdogan had declared among his policy priorities lifting the legal obstacles for female university students and teachers to wear the headscarf and the rearranging of work hours to enable the practicing Muslims to catch up with the daily prayer, etc. These declarations and other acts which allegedly encouraging the Islamist circles alarmed the military and the secular circles in the face of the growing visibility of the public manifestations of Islam (Dagı,1998:119). Following the intervention the military announced in October 1997 that "reactionary Islamic movements" posed a much greater threat to the state than Kurdish separatism (Cizre 2002:195-196). After the MGK meeting the military high command launched a campaign to mobilize civil society, media and business circles (and the judiciary) against what they saw the most important threat to the Republic, Islamic fundamentalism. It set out to 'educate the general public on the dangers of Islam' (Michaud-Emin,2007: 42). In this campaign, the Turkish Armed forces appealed directly to different sections of society in an heightened sense of Islamist threat with the objective of imposing a monolithic social project on the whole society (Cizre and Çınar, 2003:310)<sup>6</sup>. The RP was closed by the Constitutional Court in January 1998 on the grounds that the party challenged secular and democratic character of the state in Turkey.

Through the campaign to eradicate political Islam and to repress its allies in the civil society (including associations, business and the Islamic communities) the major actors of centre-right came to enjoy less room of manoeuvre in their historic mission called by Göle as a

<sup>4</sup> For a succinct account of the social base of the RP in the 1980s and 1990s see.(Gülalp.2001)

<sup>5</sup> The military wing consisted of the Chief of General Staff and the heads of the army departments.

<sup>6</sup> For a more effective monitoring of the reactionary threat, *the Western Study Group* was formed within the General Staff headquarters directly answerable to the MGK to collect information about civil society groups, media personalities, elected politicians and bureaucrats. Earlier in January 1997, another new organ under the Prime Ministry had been formed within the MGK Secretariat by a governmental decree to carry out the tasks of observing and reporting the crises caused by Islamic reactionism and to formulate responses to them.(Cizre Sakallıoğlu, 2002:196).

“cohabitation bw secularism and Muslim identity”(Göle, 1995: 43). The centre-left embraced the secularist message more strongly (Cizre and Çınar 2003: 315-318). The CHP which has entered the parliament as the second party following the 2002 elections on a platform addressed the fears of the secular middle and upper middle classes characterized itself as the party with the mission to protect the Republic.<sup>7</sup>

The intervention accelerated the decline of the centre-right and centre-left and deepened their identity crisis. Their electoral decline continued in 1999 elections, and the CHP was left outside of the Parliament as its total votes fell below the national threshold. By the time Turkey went to the polls in 3 November 2002 a “failed party system”, the quest of the electorate for a viable alternative in the face of weak and ineffective opposition and a “national call for creating and maintaining economic stability at any cost” provided a convenient atmosphere for the pro-Islamic groups to present themselves as an alternative by forging an alliance among the Islamic, liberal and the economically dislocated groups (Tepe 2006: 114).

### The Plight of the Reformists of the RP : The Making of a New Centre ?

The ascendancy of the AKP was considered to be indicative of a ‘shift from political to social Islam’ (Dagi 2008: 29), and a success story in terms of the transformation of political Islam into a moderate force in Turkish party politics ‘reconciled to the secular principles of the Republic.’ (Özbudun 2006 b,547). These contentions were based on an observation of both the party’s approach to secularism outlined in the party program, the statements of its leader and the moderate approach of its leading representatives refraining from a polarizing discourses esp during its first term in government. After the elections the party leaders projected the AKP as a centre party by abandoning their Islamist discourse. The most central pillar of this transformation of political Islam into a more moderate and progressive force was political learning and “maturing experiences” on the part of the Islamists which emerged after almost three decades of clashes with the secularist forces in the Turkish political system (Cizre and Cınar 2003, Dogan, 2005:427).

It should be noted that the RP had always followed “a long-term strategy” in its engagement with the state since the 1970s. Considering the state as essential to the protection of the interests of the Muslims, it refrained from violence in the face of repression from the secularist establishment. Electoral competitive pressures from the centre-right had also forced the Islamist cadres to moderate their demands. (Çınar and Duran, 25). However, this strategy went hand in hand with their strategy of making inroads into the state administration by capturing parts of the state bureaucracy in coalition periods (as in the 1970s). Although the RP was a leadership party, *par excellence*, the quest by its younger and dynamic cadres for a re-direction in its electoral strategy was already evident in the party in the early 1990s. Tayyip Erdoğan’s strategy after becoming the head of the RP’s İstanbul provincial organization in 1985 (and later the mayor of İstanbul in 1992), was oriented toward becoming a center party

<sup>7</sup> In this author’s interviews with the CHP representatives in 2004 in the context of the relations between the government and the opposition this point was overemphasized. The CHP’s regime guardianship character was also underlined to me by a recent interview by another deputy and a member of the party assembly (June 2009)

which would embrace all sections, by winning the votes of ‘the believers, the mosque and the community,’<sup>8</sup> A new party, the Virtue Party (FP) was founded in July 2001 to succeed the RP . In this period Erdoğan emphasized more forcefully the importance of ‘listening to the voice of the grassroots’. Before he formed AKP after completing his prison sentence,<sup>9</sup> Erdoğan underlined his distance from the NOM in order to form a broadly-based political entity by opening up to non-traditional sections of electorate. The new party would not be an Islamic party; it would not appeal only to the social base of FP, but to those of other parties.<sup>10</sup>

In the new political stance of the FP, the EU process would lead to significant democratization reforms which would also cripple the repressive capacities of the Kemalist state toward the Islamists (Cınar and Duran, 24, Tanıyıcı, 474-475) Despite its moderate rhetoric the FP leaders’ democracy understanding were non-pluralist and was occupied with the necessary constitutional and legal changes to make party closure difficult in Turkey and to lift the political bans of Erbakan and his associates (Cizre-Cınar:325). The defeat of the candidate of the reformist wing, Abdullah Gül in the first FP Convention of 14 May 2000, who lost the leadership to Recai Kutan, was indicative of the determination of the reformist cadres to open a new page in the Islamist political tradition.<sup>11</sup> Erdoğan was excluded from party politics and Erbakan was imposed a political.<sup>12</sup> The FP’s was closed in 2001 by the Constitutional Court for being a continuation of a previously banned party. Then, the reformist wing which established the AKP in August 2001 set out to establish a new party by eliminating the democratic deficits of the RP namely, lack of intra-party democracy, self-criticism and transparency. (Cizr andÇınar, 2003; 326)

### The Change Agenda of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) after Its First Electoral Victory

Although the AKP was approached with doubt and reservations as to its genuine intentions, it was apparent from its inception that the first phase of party building and its contestation for power would also be a process devoted to prove its non-Islamic credentials and to forge a broad coalition among conservative and secular circles. This new formation would be moderately Islamic rather than a continuation of the NOM despite the fact that many members and the leading names of the party were formerly part of it. It was claimed that the new party’s objective would be to “transmit various demands and sensitivities to the political sphere by “embracing the society as a whole, not just the believers” (Çağlayan-İçener, 597).

The electoral victory of the AKP in the 2002 general elections<sup>13</sup> demonstrated that it was a heterogeneous party in terms of voter support, largely based on reactions of the cross-section

<sup>8</sup> Published Interview with Bülent Arınç, a central figure in the RP.(Çakır and Çalmuk, 132-133. )

<sup>9</sup> Erdoğan had been found guilty of provoking religious hatred among people by reciting a poem in Siirt in 1998 and was imprisoned for one year on the basis of the notorious Article 312 of the Penal Code.

<sup>10</sup> Çakır and Çalmuk ,p. 178 and 189.

<sup>11</sup> Abdullah Gül won the votes of 521 party delegates out of 1154.

<sup>12</sup> After the closure of the RP in January 1998 by the Constitutional Court a five year ban was imposed on Erbakan along with five other party administrators. After the closure of the FP the traditionalists established the Felicity Party on 20 July 2001 and the reformists founded the AKP on 14 August 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Winning 34.3 per cent of the total valid vote, the AKP controlled an absolutemajority of the parliamentary seats 363 out of 550)

of the electorate to bad governance and economic mismanagement (Çarkoglu, 2002.; 131.)<sup>14</sup> Most importantly, the fact that ‘the party positioned at the most distant from the state’ had emerged the first party heralded the prospect of transforming the political regime by destroying the hegemony of the statist-Westernizing elites (Insel,2003; 306). In other words, the AKP’s sweeping majority was largely a re-assertion of the political power of the periphery (since the Democratic Party victory in 1950) reflecting the rise of the hitherto under-represented rural-suburban conservative groups (Kotsovilis, 2006: 59)<sup>15</sup>

Following the elections, Erdogan claimed that he had “changed in line with the need to catch up with developments, the modern age,”<sup>16</sup> and that they had “taken off the shirt of National View”<sup>17</sup>. After the elections, the AKP has committed itself to the objectives set forward in its *The Electoral Manifesto, The Emergency Action Plan and the Government Program*, emphasizing both democracy issues and the economic issues. The reform process towards the EU membership was embraced as the most important item in the new government’s agenda (Çinar, 2006)<sup>18</sup> The party leaders declared that the headscarf issue was not a priority for the government. Abdullah Gül, the second man in the party, who was given the mandate to form the government declared that the right to wear headscarf should be considered as a matter of individual liberties<sup>19</sup> indicating a clear shift from the RP’s stand on the issue, perceiving in the context of democracy rather than Islamism. In the party program, the AKP’s notion democracy was formulated as parallel to the liberal democracy notion by centralizing the individual in the political process.<sup>20</sup> After receiving the mandate to for the new government, Tayyip Erdogan claimed that the new political understanding of the AKP based on the conservative democracy identity, held a conception of politics as” a domain of compromise” in his speech on the 59<sup>th</sup> Government program addressing the Parliament on 18 March 2003<sup>21</sup>. He also noted that in the past Turkish politics had not gained anything from political discourses and styles which had led to tensions in the system.

Erdogan introduced the AKP as “a conservative and a mass party”; he presented the new era that started with the electoral victory of the AKP as the start of “second Menderes era” referring to the legacy of the populist DP led by Adnan Menderes(1950-1960). He claimed that the AKP was not a continuation of a party but the inheritor of the DP, and that he was

<sup>14</sup> According to the surveys taken after the 2002 elections, the AKP won the votes of the centrist voters who had voted for the other parties in the previous elections. Its support base was ideologically socially and geographically diverse. (Dagi, 2006,93)

<sup>15</sup> Serdar Turgut : “ the AKP has Destroyed the Power of the White Turks” .*Haberturk online* June 3 2004)

<sup>16</sup> Erdogan quoted in Ian Fisher, “Turkey Waits and Wonders How Closely Bound to Islam Is Election Victor?” *New York Times* 7 Nov 2002

<sup>17</sup> *Zaman Daily* 2003 17 May

<sup>18</sup> Erdogan: “The First Job is the EU, then it is the economy” *Radikal Daily* ,4 Nov 2002

<sup>19</sup> *Yeni Safak* , Daily 25 November 2002.

<sup>20</sup> AKP Program, [www.akparti.org.tr](http://www.akparti.org.tr)

<sup>21</sup> *The Program of the 59th Government Submitted to the TBMM by Prime Minister Erdogan (18 March 2001)*. The first AKP Government, the short-lived 58th Government formed by the AKP’s second man, Abdullah Gül, came to an end when in February 2003 Tayyip Erdogan entered into the Parliament in a byelection in the Province of Siirt after an amendment to the pres law making Erogan eligible for election. Under the Turkish Constitution anyone who is not elected to the Turkish Parliament is not eligible for the mandate to form the government

given by the people “the mission of realizing the democracy for the first time since Menderes”.<sup>22</sup>

### Idealists Turning Populists? : Following in the Footsteps of Conservative-Right

Populism as a mobilization strategy embraced by parties relying on direct appeals by charismatic leaders to the citizens considered as a mass has been a defining feature of the conservative centre parties in Turkey since the 1950s. Populism of the centre-right parties in Turkey since the 1950s bears some parallels to some extent with the populism of the Latin American countries with its charismatic leaders, significant weaknesses in party institutionalization and the presentation by leaders of themselves as “the agent and the embodiment of the people” (Plattner, 2010: 88). However, Turkish populism in party politics has remained predominantly as a discursive strategy (Toprak,1992; 41-65; Kasaba,1993) in contrast to its Latin American counterparts embedded in structural conflicts and redistributive policies.

The discourse of the conservative right parties in Turkey has evolved as a populist opposition of the “nation” challenging the social transformation project of the Kemalist elites. Republican elitism regarded the cultural underdevelopment of the masses as potential sources of reactionism. Throughout the 1950s the Democratic Party led by its charismatic leader, Mendere mobilized peripheral masses in party politics against the bureaucratic centre. The democracy mission of the conservative right, however, included pragmatic elements rather than an abstract defense of liberalism and democracy. References to “the national will” wrapped in a discourse which transferred the spiritual and metaphysical features of the state to the nation defined as “the unity in the moral, cultural and belief” (Mert, 2007, Kasaba, 1991). Majoritarianism of the DP had left an enduring legacy in the Turkish party politics and provided for its successor parties a blueprint for mobilization of the periphery with the ‘national will’ pitted against the military and its allies in the state and civil society) Both the Justice Party (1961-1980) and the True Path Party (1983-2009) led by Demirel spoke on behalf of the national will and justified their policies with a similar democracy understanding. The national will denoted the supremacy of the will of the civilians during periods of the assertion of military tutelage and crude interventions (Mert, 54) ,The national will discourse did not lose its vitality and centrality in the DP-AP (and later the DYP) line because although the new economic elites in time challenged the dominant position of the state elites, “a cultural status quo” perpetuated the exclusion of these groups ( (Mert,2007) <sup>23</sup>

The AKP leaders highlight their commonalities with the populist DP of the 1950s in the sense of being the representative of the nation (millet) *vis a vis* the authoritarian and secularist elites. Erdogan identified himself with the “Black Turks” and the AKP was presented as “the party of the people...voice of the silent masses, protector of the defenseless”.... the nation and national will discourse of the party was also blended with references to the service to the

<sup>22</sup> Recep Tayyip Erdogan, “We are Not the Continuation of National Outlook, but that of the Democratic Party”, *Daily Zaman*, May 17, 2003.

<sup>23</sup> In the 1990s according to the leader of the True Path Party( DYP ), successor of the pre-coup AP, the major problem of Turkish democracy was the control of the state by those groups who were alienated from the nation. While this group was the secularist bureaucracy in the pre-1980 period, it was representatives of a cosmopolitan bourgeoisie (of the big business and media entities) in the 1990s , later to be attracted to the Motherland Party (ANAP)(Mert, 2007) .



people. The AKP often referred to "the nation" and to "the will of the nation" to highlight the undisputable supremacy of the AKP majority in the parliament during the policy process (Taskin,2008). This rhetoric was also used to justify their alleged struggle against bureaucratic tutelage. During the controversial issues which came up especially in the constitutional reforms endorsed by the party in its second term in government. Erdogan claimed in his speech to the Parliament on the Program of the 59<sup>th</sup> Government in March 2001 that,

“...We do not hold a conception of governance exclusively based on numerical strength. We are for a political understanding that derives its strength from societal consensus. In our opinion, the main source of political power lies in the legitimacy derived from its general acceptance by the nation in line with the acceptance of the national will.....”

As implied in the speech of Erdogan the national will which should be the main pillar of the policies of a government that came through a majority in the elections does not necessarily mean the domination of the majority. However, frequent references to the national will by the AKP leaders in the subsequent period have attested to the fact this theoretical difference between the national will and the electoral majority has disappeared in their approach to the concrete issues and problems faced by the government.

Another significant aspect of the populism of centre-right party politics of the pre-1980 era in Turkey has been the success of the party leaders in projecting images of themselves as the "people's men" as opposed to the elitist leaders of the Republican tradition which has always kept a distance from the masses. This image was supported by the more humble background of the conservative party leaders. Even when leaders came from middle and uppermiddle class families, their successful identification with the economic, social and political demands of the conservative groups and the commercial groups who resented statist controls and the ideological hegemony of the Republican elites have made them "one from among us". Such leaders were also good orators, as in the case of Menderes, with the ability to promote emotional ties with their followers. Erdogan's oratory abilities and his charismatic appeal has also been very important from the beginning in the success of the AKP to project an image of an anti-establishment party. Erdogan came from more humble origins than those of the other politicians of the centre-right in Turkey, as the child of a large and religious family who moved from Anatolia to a lower-middle class district in Istanbul during his childhood. He has "consolidated this sense of belonging by virtue of someone who has for the most part avoided the paths followed by the traditional Republican elites" (Insel: 299). Erdogan's body language, his different way of connecting with the people at the bottom of the social ladder and his authoritative style has also added to his popularity. Hence, he has been more successful than any of the previous generation of conservative leaders in projecting an image of "the most authentic representative of the nation". This image is supported by the generally more modest and qualitatively different background of the AKP party politicians and the deputies from the rest of the parties in that they represent a more traditional worldview, conservative family backgrounds and education, and dynamic economic aspirations (Sayari, 2007). All these have greatly contributed to the popular support to Erdogan in his political age and presented and justified the political reform agenda as necessary changes to realize the supremacy of the nation.

Intraparty oligarchy formed around charismatic leaders fed by the penchant for strong leaders in Turkish the political culture has been another important feature of the centre-right as well as of the NOM. The AKP also suffers from this democratic deficit which has placed its leader at the centre of the democratization process. Prior to the establishment of the AKP Erdogan

had criticized the tradition of absolute leader hegemony within RP and FP, and its ‘monopolist political mentality’ (Çakır and Çalmuk, 151). In contrast to his previous stand, Erdoğan always emphasized ‘the chain of command in the organization, especially to loyalty’. Within the party the weakness of “...the intra-party mechanisms of consultation”,<sup>24</sup> and the absence of a “second and third men in the decision-making process” perpetuates the weakness of a philosophy of change for the party.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the selection of high administrative officials in the party conventions with through the participation of delegates works through complete the submissiveness of the delegates to the central organization. While this situation is not unique to the AKP in the Turkish party system, the idea of having the members select the delegates has been proposed in the party, but this has never attracted support. Erdoğan, as the party general chair, retains the authority to dissolve any local party administration without sufficient intra-party deliberation (Tepe, 2005:74). An indication of the declining significance of deliberation and intra-party exchange of ideas has been the changed nature of the ‘consultation meetings’ in the party. These used to be held regularly, but now appear to be less regular and less conducive to dialogue between the central party and the deputy group and the rank and file. These regular meeting used to act like open forums in which interested party members, delegates and local figures could express their ideas and problems in a small group format. Recently, they have become less functional in terms of ‘creating genuine consultation’, by adopting a more structured meeting style with the higher-ranking members of the parliamentary group and the leader.

#### The “Conservative Democratic” AKP : a New Version of the Motherland Party?

It was argued that the AKP has “successfully rebuilt the Özal coalition bringing together former centre-right voters, moderate Islamists, moderate nationalists, and even a certain segment of the former centre-left”. (Özbudun 2006a: 546, Öniş, 2007, 248, Öniş, 2009:27). It was considered to be belonging to the same modernizationist conservative world” with the ANAP, the dominant party of the center right after the transition to democracy (İnsel, 2003, 295). Research uncovered that among the provincial members of AKP a significant proportion were previously supporters of ANAP (Dalmis and Aydın, 2008:209). Moreover, in the November 2003 elections the AKP’s greatest strength was in the provinces where the ANAP has been the forerunner in the 1983 and 1987 elections (Dagı,2006: 94).<sup>26</sup> In the post-1980 economic liberalization ANAP’s policies under Özal leadership, “represented “a breach in the authoritarian state-centered view” (Insel,2003 :295). During the post-1980 dismantling of the statist economic model ANAP had become the new address for the “culturally conservative, politically nationalist and moderately authoritarian economically liberal new middle classes” in conflict with the traditional middle classes (the republican bourgeoisie and its economic and political allies at the center) (Taskın, 2008, 56). In 2002, the AKP emerged to be the voice of these groups and wealthy conservative Anatolians (private entrepreneurs, their non state- backed industries and companies) were attracted to Erdoğan’s discourse on self-efficiency and corruption (Kotsovilis, 2006, 59).<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Author’s interview with a founding member of the AKP.(July 2009)

<sup>25</sup> Author’s Interview with an ex-AKP deputy of the previous legislative period.(July 2009)

<sup>26</sup> Based on the surveys led by Tarhan Erdem, *Radikal Daily* November 6, 2002

<sup>27</sup> For a comparison of the of the two parties’ economic policies, see Simten Cosar and Aylin Özman, 57-74.

The AKP was also comparable to ANAP to some extent in terms of its inclusive strategy to recruit political figures across the conservative spectrum.<sup>28</sup> A significant part of AKP's leadership and the parliamentary group consists of religiously conservative figures who take a pragmatic approach to politics. Some of these people possess a background of political experience within the center-right DYP and ANAP. However, In contrast to ANAP, the AKP's leading cadres are largely drawn from MSP-RP formation. Those figures to Erdoğan personally and to the party's historic political line are allowed to hold critical positions, and this has met with criticisms occasionally from the 'outsiders' (those who came from non-Islamic right-wing parties).<sup>29</sup>

Besides sharing a similarity in terms of the broadness of the electoral and political alliance, the AKP seems also similar to the ANAP in its pragmatism and its conception of politics as service to the nation. However, the AKP's political identity is largely dominated by its populist rhetoric and its endorsement of Islamic identity claims within the discourse of conservative democracy. Common to the two parties' conservatism lies in their adoption "religious values as moral values and emphasizing freedom of conscience and nationalism not as love of the state but love of the country reminiscent of American popular conservatism,(Insel, 302). Nevertheless, Özal's "progressive conservatism" was not elaborated reflecting the party's disgust of ideological pronouncements. In contrast, the "conservative democracy" discourse of the AKP was an attempt to combine traditional centre-right themes of the protection of moral and cultural values of the centre-right and of the NOM by abandoning the Islamist conception of the later (Akdogan, 2003:,16,132; Duran, 86). While in the AKP's Manifesto on conservative democracy Islam was subordinated to conservative values (Çınar and Duran, 2008) its commitment to democracy lacks the expected connotations of 'empowering the individuals *vis-à-vis* the state and loosening the state's tight grip on society'.<sup>30</sup> In this deficiency, the discourse echoes the populism of DP and the AP in the 1950s and 1960s rather than the pragmatism of the ANAP. In view of the vagueness (Duran 2008:86, Tepe, 2006:122) and the philosophical weakness of this identity (Altun,2009), conservatism of AKP remains "more a code word signaling the new elite's determination to survive politically".(Turunc, 89) and introduced to "escape from the self-defeating success of political Islam" (Dagi, 2006:95,), and a means used to avoid being labeled as reactionaries in the eyes of the Republican elites" (Çaglayan- İçener, 607, Dagi ,2008,27)<sup>31</sup>

### Selective Approach to the Political Reform Process and Backtracing from the Quest for Consensus

Despite being a peripheral force the "conservative democratic" AKP embraced a pro-globalization approach "to break the resistance of the bureaucratic and ideological centers (Dagi 2006: 93). As a "conservative globalist" force confronted by "a defensive nationalist" block, it has spearheaded the political reforms to accelerate the Europeanization process

<sup>28</sup> Interview with the ex-AKP deputy (same in Footnote 27)

<sup>29</sup> Interview with an ex-deputy of the AKP who was also a central figure from the center right True Path Party coming from the DP background. He made the point that when he was in the AKP, he occasionally advised Erdoğan to pay more attention to striking a balance among the center-right figures.

<sup>30</sup> Tepe ,2005 70

<sup>31</sup> Author's interview with the same ex-AKP deputy. 27.July 2009.

(Öniş, 2007) to forge a compromise with the secular establishment and to legitimize its claim to become a centrist force (Dogan,2005;430) . Parallel to its declarations before the elections of 2002, the AKP leaders declared after coming power that they would refrain from polarizing domestic politics and would aim at the preparation of a new constitution with a participatory and liberal spirit to replace the 1982 Constitution. Erdogan emphasized the government's promise to “engage in the efforts to promote the most effective participation of the opposition parties and all other social sectors to the extent to would be possible besides their own ideas in the preparation of this constitution”<sup>32</sup> In the ensuing period, the government refrained from economic populism, and largely restored economic stability in the country by remaining committed to the stabilization program. Moreover, the impressive political reform record of the government (the passing of the six harmonization packages and far reaching constitutional reforms between January 2003 and July 2004 <sup>33</sup>were seen as “democratic accomplishments unprecedented in previous Turkish governments” (Kotsovilis, 57)

However, after a legislative period overburdened with the passing of the legislative reforms necessary for meeting the EU demands on the way to full membership, the initiatives of the AKP government to amend the Constitution were intertwined with its struggle against the secularist forces which became more pronounced after 2007. The crisis erupted during the Presidential elections in the spring of 2007 was set against a background of the AKP's plans to amend the Constitution. While the government insisted on a candidate from among its ranks by paying only lip service to inter-party consensus led to a crisis during the plenary sessions on the ballot for the presidential candidate of the AKP, Abdullah Gül in May 2007. The opposition of the military and the Constitutional Court to the process suspended the election process temporarily.<sup>34</sup> Before the new parliamentary elections to be held on 22 July 2007, the Erdogan government prepared a new Constitutional amendment package which would strengthen its hand in the future constitutional changes in the elections as well as in the presidential election process. Despite the veto of President Sezer, the AKP majority could pass several amendments by the help of the minor parties to hurt the elections chances of independent candidates (which was practically targeted at the Kurdish nationalist deputies), shortening of the legislative period from five to four years, the popular election of the president and making the meeting quorum for the parliament for all acts one third of its full membership. While these changes were opposed by the main opposition center-left CHP and was also vetoed by the President, the parliament approved these changes in its second

<sup>32</sup> *The Program of the 59th Government Submitted by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to the Turkish Grand National Assembly*, 18 March 2003.

<sup>33</sup> The AKP took up the reform process initiated by the previous coalition government which passed the amendments abolishing the death penalty and allowed breasting in languages other than Turkish in the summer of 2002. Between January and June 2003 four democratization packages were passed in the parliament which introduced significant liberalization in civilian control over the military, in freedom of expression and freedom of association. In the 6th and 7th reform packages, amendments were made to the notorious anti-terror law, lifting the state of emergency in the Southeast and broadcasting in Kurdish in private TV and radio stations, granting partial amnesty to separatist militants, removing executive powers of NSC and ensuring parliamentary control over the defense, See for details: Özbudun and Genckaya, 2009.

<sup>34</sup> On 27 April 2007 known was the e-memorandum, the Chief of General Staff warned against activities provoking debates on secularism, and made it clear that the Armed Forces was for a candidate who is committed to secularism. The Constitutional Court passed a ruling on 1 May 2007 setting the requires quorum for the first ballot in the Presidential election at 367 thereby disabling the AKP majority to elect its candidate

consideration.<sup>35</sup> The election of Abdullah Gül to Presidency by the AKP parliamentary majority came after the party's second electoral victory in July 2007 (46,7 per cent and 340 out of 550 seats)<sup>36</sup> In this process, the Republican Rallies mobilizing the secular- oriented middle-classes in several cities during the “constitutional battles of 2007” between the AKP and the secularist comprising the President, the military and the Constitutional Court heightened social tensions along the secular-Islamist lines.<sup>37</sup>

The AKP's strategy of using constitutional amendments as a major weapon in its battle with the secularist front became more pronounced after its electoral victory in 2007. In its *Electoral Manifesto* the AKP had made the promise of a new “civilian” constitution described as a ‘social contract’.<sup>38</sup> While a draft proposal was prepared by a group of a constitutional experts upon the request of the Prime Minister on August 2007 (Arslan,2007) , some of the proposed novelties in the draft (such as making the closure of parties difficult, the curbing of some powers of the President, removing the prevailing restrictions on judicial review of the Supreme Council of Judges and Public Prosecutors (HSYK) and that of the Supreme Military Council (YAŞ), and the changes in the composition of the Constitutional Court were met with severe objections from the secularist circles before it was submitted by the government to a more comprehensive discussion in the public opinion<sup>39</sup>. However, instead of proceeding with this constitutional draft and expanding the work on it to submit with a moderate proposal acceptable to broad social and political sectors, the government hastened to submit another amendment with a narrower scope to change Articles 10 and 42 of the Constitution aimed at lifting the ban on the headscarf on female university students on 29 January 2008.<sup>40</sup>

The amendments in question was stillborn since it was passed despite the objections of the secular parties and organized sections of the civil society and the President .Lifting the ban was dependent on the subsequent changes to be made to the relevant legislation, hence, the consensus of the other parties was needed. Since the ban was also stemmed from a specific interpretation of the Constitutional Court which based its decision on the headscarf on the Article 4 of the Turkish Constitution which was unamendable<sup>41</sup> it was evident that this proposed change would need a much deeper consensus on the foundations of the Constitution and on the meaning of the principle of secularism in Turkey. In the event, the center-left CHP and the DSP deputies challenged the constitutional amendment before the Constitutional Court on the grounds that it was against the unchangeable articles of the Constitution protecting the secular character of the state<sup>42</sup>. On June 5 2008, the Court annulled the amendment. Erdogan criticized the Constitutional Court which cancelled the amendment by engaging in a review of its substance (by violating its constitutional power to carry put

<sup>35</sup> Özbudun and Genckaya, 2009, p.99-100. The CHP submitted the changes to the Constitutional Court with the claim of unconstitutionality, but this was rejected by the Court

<sup>36</sup> With the support of the National Action Party (MHP).

<sup>37</sup> The amendments passed prior to the elections were voted in a referendum in 21 October 2007 since President Sezer submitted the readopted proposal (following his veto) to popular vote before the elections.

<sup>38</sup> *The Electoral Manifesto of the AKP, 2007*

<sup>39</sup> Özbudun and Genckaya p.104-105.

<sup>40</sup> Özbudun 2009, 107-108. Since amending the Constitution requires a qualified majority, i.e. two-thirds of the total membership of the TBMM (366 out of 550), the AKP was in need of the support of other parties / independents in the Parliament.

<sup>41</sup> “ Changes in Laws are a Must ” *Milliyet Daily* 17 Feb 2008.

<sup>42</sup> During the plenary sessions on the proposed changes in the parliament the CHP parliamentary groups's deputy chair identified the changes as an act of “ counter-revolution” and as an attempt “to take revenge from the Republic.” . Fikret Bila, “Not the Turban Session but the Secularism Session” *Milliyet Daily*, 7 February 2008.

procedural review on constitutional amendments) by stating that the power to legislate belonged to the elected organs in democratic systems, and he openly challenged the Court to account for the verdict.<sup>43</sup>

It should be noted that the AKP's ordeal during its first term in government under the Presidency of Sezer, during the crisis of the Presidential elections whose initial stage was aborted by the Constitutional Court in "an extremely controversial ruling", and its confrontation with the secular judicial bureaucracy were indicative of its difficulties in governance. It should be remembered that on March 14, 2008 the Chief Justice opened a closure case against the party on the grounds that it was violating the principle of secularism defined in the Article 2 of the Constitution.<sup>44</sup> This created a temporary era of uncertainty and added to the perception of increased intervention of the secularist judiciary into politics. The weakness of consensus among the political elite over the meaning of secularism, the enduring strength of the Islamist-secular cleavage in the society, the formidable inflexibility of the secularist establishment in the bureaucracy, judiciary, civilian and military bureaucracy and presidency, as well as the prevailing image of the AKP as a party with an hidden agenda indicating lack of mutual trust among political elites created a perception in the public opinion as to viability of the reform process initiated by the government. However, as the most recent process of the constitutional reforms has also highlighted, the government embraced a strategy of alienating the social and political opposition and disregarding the calls for consensus over the necessary political reforms instead of taking steps to decrease the tensions and to gain the confidence of the larger sectors of society. In the most recent constitutional amendments passed in May 2010 the AKP imposed its own draft of the amendments (which contained some of the novelties included in the draft of 2007) in a controversial manner. While the government had already announced its intentions to submit another draft proposal of constitutional amendments in the spring of 2009, the event that made the AKP to hasten with a proposal amending various articles of the 1982 Constitution became in the immediate aftermath of another crisis which erupted over the government's infuriation with the decision of the HSYK to intervene in the conflict with two provincial chief prosecutors over the alleged investigations of the activities of an Islamic community. The government condemned the intervention of the Council and found it challenged its democratic legitimacy. The Minister of Justice declared the urgency of judicial reform. The proposed judicial reform (which has long been controversial despite a general call for reform by many sectors and the judicary itself) were included in an amendment package including many diverse and controversial issues. The main opposition CHP objected in particular to the three articles in the amendment package, those of changing the composition of the HSYK, changing the Constitutional Court composition, and that of making party closure difficult. The latter would increase the necessary majority in the Court to rule for the closure of a party, and introduce the criteria of getting engaged in violence or the propaganda of violence. The proposed changes on the composition of the Court and the HSYK created an outcry from the high judges and law experts since it was argued that with these changes the independence of the judiciary would be severely constrained. The heads of high courts drew attention to the danger of the creation of a politicized judiciary with the government's proposal. The Chief Justice warned the government during the amendment process that a "majoritarian political understanding could have no validity in the realm of fundamental rights and freedoms"<sup>45</sup>.

<sup>43</sup> "Erdogan: The Court Sould Explain Its Verdict"

*Milliyet Daily* 11 June 2008.

<sup>44</sup> To the relief of the AKP, the Constitutional Court AKP barred the AKP from receiving financial support from the state budget instead of closing it (August 2008).

<sup>45</sup> "Warning from Kılıc to the Government" . *Radikal daily* 23. April 2010.

While some of the proposed changes such as those related to equal treatment, removing the criminal immunity of the military for its actions during the military administration, children's rights and the law on strikes, opening of the decisions of the HSYK to judicial review, the controversial articles making the HSYK and the Constitutional Court vulnerable to the influence of the government<sup>46</sup> was severely criticized. The CHP leader called the changes as an indication of an impending "civilian coup d'etat."

The proposed changes (all articles except for the specific change making party closure difficult) were submitted to the Parliament in a hastened way by tuning a blind eye to these criticisms and was approved by the Parliament and by President Gül without delay on 6 May 2010.<sup>47</sup> With these amendments another moment of opportunity for a comprehensive reform and a new constitution through broad political consensus was missed, and another era of uncertainty started with the prospect of the opposition's appeal to the Constitutional Court for the annulment of the controversial articles. Most importantly, the process of referendum started (planned to be held 12 September 2010) in which the amendments would be submitted for the approval of the citizens in what is likely to be a politicized campaign amidst the populism of the governing party.<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile the other more critical reforms such as changing the political parties law to make parties internally democratic, lowering the electoral threshold to ensure fairness in representation and removing the parliamentary immunities of the elected representatives to foster accountability seems to have been postponed to an indefinite future.

#### Escalation of Polarization and Conflict In the Name of "the Nation "

As already explained, taking a pro-EU turn, abandoning the dogmatic rejection of the West prevalent in the RP, accepting Western democratic values, and refraining from direct rhetorical clashes with the secular sectors have differentiated the AKP from the previous representatives of political Islam. However, as it became more evident especially after 2007 electoral victory, the AKP retains from the National Outlook Movement a tradition of absolute loyalty to the leader and symbols of identity politics. Moreover, it has not completely abandoned its confrontational approach in reform politics. In contrast to Erbakan, Erdogan did not put a distance between himself and the lower socio-economic groups. He used all occasions to note the commonalities with them in terms of the hardships of life and vigorously guarded the identity symbols of the religiously conservative people in a show of solidarity in the public portrayal of the party .."(Shankland, 55) .

<sup>46</sup> The membership of the HSYK would be increased from 7 to 10 and some of its members would be appointed by the President. Moreover the package retained the Minister of Justice as the chair of the Council along with his undersecretariat. The Constitutional Court membership was similarly increased in number and was made open to the influence of the parliament and the President through direct appointment.

<sup>47</sup> Except for the article making party change difficult in a moment of detraction surprising Erdogan, possibly due to the alleged opposition of several AKP deputies to the fact that the new situation would benefit the Kurdish nationalist parties.

<sup>48</sup> The proposed amendment package also included an article stipulating that the amendments after approval by the TBMM would be submitted to the referendum. Under the current Constitution the President also has the right to submit any amendments passed in the parliament with the vote count of 367 or below.

In projecting an image of itself as the only actor of maintaining the struggle against the secularist establishment, the AKP has used a “soft religious language against strict secularism” (Duran, 2008:86). Erdogan often declared that while states could be secular individuals could not be secular. On a more specific instance, in November 2005 when the Grand Chamber at the European Court of Human rights declared that the headscarf ban in Turkey was not violating the European Convention of Human rights as it rejected the appeal of Leyla Sahin, covered university student, Erdogan did not hide his disappointment and anger at this decision stating. Much to the disgust of the secularist circles, he stated that “ ...I do not understand the way they view the headscarf. A court cannot make decisions on such matters; the ulema should...”<sup>49</sup> These comments and specific initiatives and policies of the AKP (e.g. the notorious legislative proposal to criminalize adultery in the Autumn of 2004 which was withdrawn by the government, and the high increases on the taxes levied on alcoholic beverages) strengthened the conviction of the seculars that the AKP had not ceased to be an Islamist formation by heart.

The tension among the state elites and the AKP elites over the use of headscarf in the public sphere ran particularly high during the term (2000-2007) of President of Ahmet Necdet Sezer, known for his hardline secularist views. In November 2002, when the newly elected speaker of the Parliament Bülent Arınç was accompanied by his headscarved wife in the state protocol to see off the President and his wife on their way to an official visit abroad this was taken as a symbolic but a blunt challenge to the secular state. Thereafter, during Sezer’s presidency the wives of the deputies of the governing party was not invited to state receptions (on the 80th anniversary of the Republic especially) due to their headscarves although the opposition deputies were invited along with their wives.

Beyond the use of these symbols of Islamic identity politics, the AKP has also seemed determinant in enlarging the space for the religious demands to make inroads into the state’s secular system of education and bureaucracy. Cases in point are the AKP’s recent pressure on the Higher Education Council to change the system of university entrance through amending in the relevant laws to facilitate the graduates of the vocational school graduates (including those of the preacher and schools to enter the university which prompted the opposition CHP to appealing to the Constitutional Court for its annulment. The AKP government’s ferocious efforts to locate in the bureaucratic positions those who are known with their Islamic orientations who have been their supporters led observers to consider this as a systematic purge of the secular bureaucracy and the politicization of the state.

Finally the so-called *Ergenekon* process which was allegedly oriented to cleanse the state from the gangs formed in the civilian and military bureaucracy has been the latest in the chain of polarization endorsed and supervised by the government. Largely remaining an enigma in terms of the real substance of the crimes attributed to a large circle of people consisting of academics, senior justices, public prosecutors, journalists and retired and active military officers, civil society representatives this process have further divided the society and has generated within the military high command as part of a scheme to weaken the morale and the unity of the Turkish armed forces. The events have led to the conviction in the secularist public that there has been a deliberate and systematic government-sponsored campaign of assault against the secular institutions and figures. In this protracted process of detainment,

<sup>49</sup> quoted in Duran, 2008: 93. Here because the term *ulema* refers to the official class of the learned men of Islam in the Ottoman state system, the secularists took this statement to imply Erdogan’s effectively hidden Islamist aspirations and agenda.



arrest, imprisonment and trials, direct assaults on the secularist circles took place through the legal prosecutions carried against several civil society organizations known for their Kemalist views and for their criticism of the AKP government.<sup>50</sup> The government's confrontational rhetoric and its acts towards the politicization of the judiciary has also added to this deepening sense of a wave of repression and intimidation targeting at those sectors who have been critical of the AKP policies. For its part the government's approach was to present this process as a sign of democratization, increasing accountability and putting an end to the impunity of the anti-democratic forces in Turkey. Coupled with the complexities and the uncertainty in the government's constitutional reforms, this strategy of confrontation and backtracking from consensus have perpetuated social polarization in Turkey along the pro- and anti-AKP lines, transcending the conventional polarization along the Islamist versus the Secular.

### Conclusions

As progress toward democratization was underway in the 1990s in Turkey, the conventional fault-line along the Islamist-secular cleavage and the centrifugal pressures from the Islamist WP considerably strained the consolidation process in Turkey simultaneously with the deepening of the institutional problems in the party system. The rise of the AKP attested to the significance of the transformation of political Islamists in Turkey into a moderate force aimed at a re-definition of secularism rather than posing a direct challenge to it. However, this transformation in Turkey was not accompanied by the weakening of the Islamist-secularist confrontation. On the contrary, as this paper has demonstrated, the AKP's populism and its approach to the political reform process with the self-appointed "conservative democracy identity" has deepened the prevailing ideological divisions in the society and political system.

The appeal to the "will of the nation" epitomized by the majorities in the ballot box has been the major discursive instruments through which the AKP leaders have located themselves in the tradition of Turkish center-right and justified their pro-democratic agenda. The AKP's embracement of a majoritarian understanding of democracy which was a defining feature of the democracy mission of the centre-right parties (and some extent of the Islamic right) constituted the major pillar of its populist strategy in vote mobilization and in the justification of its selective reform agenda. Moreover, although the AKP claimed to break from the National View Tradition (which was the ideological backbone of the Islamist parties since the late 1960s in Turkey), it has continued to polarize the Islamic identity issues, claiming to represent the hitherto excluded conservative and the socially and economic dynamic sectors of the society by referring to their victimization by the secularist elite and establishment. It declared a battle against what they saw (secular) bureaucratic tutelage and juristocracy. Hence, the government has increasingly become intolerant of opposition and has pursued a selective democratization agenda by concentrating on those changes to consolidate its control over the political and civil society. This strategy has turned into a style of politics highly dependent on Tayyip Erdogan and fed by polarization rather than consensus. The AKP has not touched on the remaining problems of ensuring fairness in representation and fostering democratic accountability via a reform of the electoral law, political parties law and the provisions of the Constitution pertaining to the immunities of the parliamentarians. Its selective democratization agenda, discursive conservative populism, and polarizing rhetoric

<sup>50</sup> "Erdogan: There is More to Ergenekon". *Milliyet Daily*, 17 February 2008.

*vis a vis* the secularist sectors has accentuated the politicization of governance and weakened the prospects of elite consensus.

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