

HOW CAN AKŞENER'S İYİ PARTİ CONTRIBUTE TO TURKEY'S DEMOCRACY?

Since the founding of Meral Akşener's İyi Parti (Good Party) in October 2017, expectations for Turkey's newest political bloc have been mounting, particularly that it can reverse Turkey's march towards an empowered presidential system and return to democratic parliamentarism. This article argues that for the İyi Parti to play a game-changing role and genuinely contribute to Turkey's democracy, it has to accomplish three missions: (1) leave the radical right, MHP heritage entirely behind once and for all, (2) promote intra-party democracy, and (3) embrace a positive and constructive discourse on the Kurdish issue. However, with a profile just like – or at least similar to – the former center-right parties of the pre-AKP period, the party is most likely doomed to fail.

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Despite Turkey's experience with a multi-party system since the 1950s, the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) excessive electoral gains since 2002 together with the most recent failed coup in July 2016, the subsequent state of emergency, and the 2017 constitutional referendum, have collectively transformed Turkey's multi-party status quo into a new structure more like a dominant-party system. More than the dominance of a single party, however, criticism is often directed at the empowerment of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on the grounds that he intends to construct an over-centralized state under his persona.

A major reason why the AKP and Erdoğan have such extensive political clout is the consistent lack of effective opposition in Turkey. The three opposition parties – namely, the Republican People's Party (CHP), Nationalist Action Party (MHP), and Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) – all share common problems, as well as perpetuate problems of their own when it comes to beating the AKP and confronting Erdoğan effectively. In addition to their modest electoral power being far from challenging the AKP's single-party rule, these three parties do not have the willingness to combine their powers for a unified front against the AKP government either.

It is within this context that Meral Akşener has recently established the *İyi Parti* (Good Party), which excites people from several strata in Turkey – particularly those concerned with the trajectory of the AKP government and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's ongoing route towards empowered presidentialism. The role of Akşener as a well-known independent actor plays a critical role in this context as she and her party carry the potential for changing the psychology and collective power of the opposition bloc.

Most recently, the MHP – under the leadership of Devlet Bahçeli – made a radical strategic move and formed a power bloc with the AKP. The MHP not only endorsed an Erdoğan-led constitutional referendum towards an empowered presidential system, but also maintained the bloc afterwards, forming a semi-official AKP-MHP coalition. While the AKP-MHP coalition seemingly gives the impression of a solid, right-wing front, it is still a marriage of convenience vulnerable to disruptive exogenous factors, such as a new, popular, and diverse opposition bloc. Even if the İyi Parti or Akşener falls short of decisively winning elections or the presidency, the dynamics of relations among the opposition actors, including CHP, HDP, İyi Parti, as well as the Felicity Party (SP) – of which President Erdoğan was formerly a member – still matter for the survival and long-term prospects of the AKP government, particularly within the context of the upcoming presidential elections in 2019. The 2017 constitutional referendum demonstrated the power of the anti-AKP/

anti-Erdoğan bloc in Turkey (also known as the “no” bloc), which included these parties from the left and right. In the scenario that the opposition more formally unites, both the İyi Parti and Akşener could play critical, unifying roles.

Akşener is not a newcomer to Turkish politics. As a political figure on the right of the political spectrum, people of Turkey remember Akşener from recent history, particularly the *Refahiyol* coalition in 1996-97. She was not only a deputy from the center-right True Path Party (DYP) but also the Minister of Interior in the Refahiyol coalition. She served as an MP from the MHP at the national legislature for three consecutive terms (2007-2015). More recently, however, as discontent with Bahçeli

grew among the party base, Akşener's name was frequently cited as a potential challenger to his leadership. She wanted to challenge Bahçeli from within the MHP, together with other competitors, including Ümit Özdağ and Sinan Oğan; and among the challengers, Akşener was always the most popular. However, her efforts to fight within the MHP were largely blocked by the MHP administration, the judicial system, and the AKP, and she was eventually expelled from the party. Akşener was left with no other choice but to form a new party.

The İyi Parti, with its founding cadre, represents and carries potential for a radical, revolutionary change within not only the MHP but also the party tradition in Turkey as a whole. Firstly, there have been only rare examples of peaceful transfer of power and chair seats in Turkey's parties. Two such examples are Bülent Ecevit winning the CHP chair after democratic elections in 1972 and Erdal İnönü peacefully leaving his party's chairmanship in 1993. This trend is no different for right-wing parties, including the MHP. Since its emergence with a transformation from an existing party back in the mid- to late 1960s, the MHP has been known as a one-man party, namely the party of its founding father, Alparslan Türkeş. The current MHP chair Bahçeli became the party leader only after Türkeş' passing in 1997. Questioning leadership is a strong indicator of democratic intra-party culture, and this is the first time it has ever happened on a massive scale from within the MHP. Secondly, it is important to point out that the leading figure of this opposition wave is a woman – an educated, secular, urban woman. Almost all major political parties in Turkey have been autocratic institutional mechanisms led by charismatic men. Turkey had

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a female party leader and prime minister from the center-right DYP in the 1990s, Tansu Çiller. However, unlike the DYP, the MHP is not a center-right party but a radical right-wing party. This is the very first time a deep sociological push, a jolting wave, has taken place within this party against a charismatic male figure. Bahçeli's leadership being challenged by a strong woman figure is twice over a revolutionary process owing also to Akşener's gender identity.

How Can the İyi Parti Truly Contribute to Turkey's Democracy?

The İyi Parti emerges with high, perhaps exaggerated, expectations for its performance within some political circles. The party is expected to become a game changer at the cost of the AKP and a challenger to President Erdoğan with a new, charismatic leader on the political stage. Nevertheless, what truly matters in this context is not the İyi Parti's short-term, practical purpose of breaking up the AKP and Erdoğan's power. What should matter most is the extent to which the İyi Parti can contribute to Turkey's democracy in the long run. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to present a discussion as to how the İyi Parti can fulfill this purpose – contributing to Turkey's democracy – rather than presenting an electoral strategy game. Certainly, there could be trade-offs between “democratic contributions” and “winning elections;” however, the purpose here is not to bridge or balance these two purposes either.

The İyi Parti has already made two of its intentions clear thus far: (1) embracing all people in Turkey as a unifier, umbrella party and refraining from provocative, divisive rhetoric; and (2) a genuine commitment to Mustafa Kemal's legacy and the founding Republican principles, particularly secularism. Both of these factors contribute to the İyi Parti's positive, constructive role. Turkey's long-standing and exhausting polarization can be overcome only by non-aggressive, peaceful, and accommodative language, which several parties have lacked over the years. If the İyi Parti could communicate through unifying, peaceful language that promotes Mustafa Kemal's founding principles, including secularism, without relying on the politics of fear and exclusion, this could help speed the political culture's maturation process and contribute to the progression of deliberative and pluralist democratic processes in Turkey.

While the party's founders have openly committed to these two purposes, there are three more important steps that the party can and should take to contribute to Turkey's democracy, which will be detailed in the following sections:

- (1) entirely disconnect from its MHP heritage and radical right, ultranationalist legacy;
- (2) promote intra-party democracy, select its MP candidates through primary elections, present itself to the public with open platforms and a publicly heterogeneous

internal structure as well as more peaceful factions;
(3) develop a new, positive, and constructive language on the Kurdish issue and establish better relations with the Kurdish left-wing HDP.

Breaking Away from the MHP's Legacy

In order to understand the İyi Parti, the MHP's historical legacy must be briefly discussed, since the overwhelming weight of the İyi Parti team comes from the MHP. While it is true that Akşener served in center-right parties and Islamist-led coalition governments earlier, her primary political identity stems from solid, MHP-type Turkish nationalism. The MHP's history goes back to the mid- to late 1960s, when its historical leader Alparslan Türkeş won the in-party fight and transformed the existing Kemalist, right-wing Republican Peasants' Nation Party (CKMP) into the MHP by promoting an anti-Communist, radical right, Turkish ultra-nationalist ideology. The MHP then started out as a fringe party, behaving more like a single-issue party whose primary goal was to fight the left/Communism back in the late 1960s and 1970s. Having been called “Başbuğ” (commander) by his followers over the years, no party member ever dared to challenge Türkeş's authority within the party. One exception was Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu, who left the MHP to form his own separate, nationalist/Islamist party, the Grand Unity Party (BBP).

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Three significant developments changed the course of the MHP: the 1980 coup, the demise of the USSR in the early 1990s, and the death of Türkeş in 1997. Shut down together with all other existing parties by the junta government in 1981, the MHP saw itself as patriotic and felt betrayed by the junta. After the collapse of Communism on the world stage and the rise of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) as an illegal armed group in the mid-1980s, the MHP's priorities shifted from fighting Communism to fighting Kurdish separatism. After Türkeş passing, Bahçeli was elected as the new party chair, and a lot changed within and for the party.

Bahçeli played a significant role in the MHP's political moderation and participation in coalition governments during his early years as chair. However, more recently, Bahçeli and his team have been heavily criticized for ignoring the party's rank-and-file members and supporters as well as its electorates' socio-economic interests. In particular, Bahçeli was criticized for prioritizing his chair over the party base. Contrary to an unquestioned and unconditionally obeyed Türkeş, Bahçeli's

leadership has faced democratic opposition from within his own party, which ultimately led to the rise and separation of Akşener and her followers.

If Akşener truly intends to maintain this revolutionary trend, the next natural step should be to decidedly leave the entire MHP legacy behind. Early signs, such as her decisions not to campaign with Türkeş posters and giving up certain hand salutes of MHP idealists (i.e., the “gray wolf” salute) are positive yet not sufficient. Both Türkeş posters and the gray wolf salutes are strong symbols of the MHP legacy, which would upset the İyi Parti’s intentions to create a centrist, moderate political actor. The İyi Parti has no space to promote any reminders of the old, “radical right” times if it wants to break free of the radical right legacy. Furthermore, in contrast to the AKP and MHP, the İyi Parti presents itself to the public as not only a mainstream political actor at the center but also a more moderate alternative to these two right-wing parties. In this context, the risk for the party is swaying not towards religious fundamentalism but towards Turkish ultra-nationalism. The more the İyi Parti shows signs of MHP-type Turkish nationalism, the less likely it will be perceived as a mainstream or centrist party – thus an alternative to the AKP and MHP – in public opinion.

In sincere terms, the moderation of the İyi Parti’s ideological tone with new, democratic themes will likely spread through the base during the party’s honeymoon period and afterwards. This will have the potential to transform the nationalist and right-wing electoral base in Turkey towards more universalistic, compromising, tolerant, and libertarian positions. Leaving the MHP legacy is a must in this context, because the entire history of the former ideology corresponds to the politics of the opposite: particularistic, confrontational, intolerant, and authoritarian. Turkey’s democratization requires the former values, definitely not the latter. Leaving the MHP heritage should also be considered a strategic move for the purpose of broadening the party’s base and electoral growth, a potential component that would contribute to the İyi Parti’s fighting the AKP government through democratic means. With a nationalist-only base and a public image that is almost a replica of the MHP, the İyi Parti will most likely find itself stuck in between other actors and the MHP rather than forging its own path.

Promotion of Intra-Party Democracy

Turkey has had a long history of inter-party, electoral democracy with free and fair elections since its transition to the multi-party system in 1950. Nevertheless, Turkey’s political culture has fallen short of generating internally democratic parties owing to never-ending authoritarian internal structures and practices, as well as authoritative party chairs. There are socio-cultural, historical, as well as competitive and individual-level explanations as to why Turkey has fallen short of developing an

intra-party democracy (IPD) culture, but laying them out is not within this article's scope. However, developing IPD is a must, and its absence, together with excessively centralized party structures with overtly strong chairs, does not contribute to any form of democracy in Turkey – deliberative, representative, or participatory.

What the İyi Parti should do is to openly announce to the public that it will encourage IPD with commitments to open and public discussion platforms, primary elections for candidate selections, intra-party freedom of expression and dissent, decentralization of power with more empowered district and local branches, plurality and variety, as well as high levels of women's and youth participation in decision and policy-making. Unfortunately, the existing major parties are far from being role models for IPD in Turkey; therefore, the İyi Parti can fill this vacuum, as well as benefit from this significant IPD opening to appeal to electorates at large.

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The promotion of IPD can be both pursued sincerely and used strategically. In particular, the İyi Parti can commit to IPD for the sake of contributing to the culture of democracy and democratization in Turkey and use this as an electoral tactic for broadening its own electoral base, thus effectually challenging the AKP. If a significant newcomer party is viewed positively by the public, its chances of attracting new, independent, undecided, non-partisan, and young voters could grow. If public opinion is convinced of the İyi Parti's sincere commitment to IPD, its electoral chances will also increase in the coming local, general, and presidential elections.

Among the four existing major parties, not including the İyi Parti, only the CHP had used primary elections for the selection of its MP candidates for the national legislature, namely the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (*Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi*, TBMM), before the 2015 elections and only to a limited extent. Even the most internally democratic party, the HDP, appointed its MP candidates for the TBMM from the party's center for electoral purposes. As part of its commitment to IDP, the İyi Parti should hold primary elections in all provinces before the elections and officially commit to primary elections for the selection of its MP candidates.

As another component of İyi Parti's commitment to IDP, the party should seek new female figures and young leaders from within the party to speak out about Turkey's

issues and problems. Simple lip service to the advancement of women and youth within the party is insufficient. The İyi Parti's moves toward gender equality are a good start, but this has to be supported by an open commitment to women's voices other than Akşener's within the party. The ratio of women on paper is not enough to balance gender equality within the party. Youth participation is also particularly important as it invigorates and ensures the party's future. When necessary, these figures in the party should be able to dissent from Akşener as well, demonstrating to the public the existence of freedom of expression within the İyi Parti.

Changing Gears on the Kurdish Issue

The İyi Parti's most significant contribution to Turkey's democracy could come from a potential breakdown of a meta-narrative: Turkish nationalists' long-standing negative and uncompromising attitude towards the Kurdish issue and the legal Kurdish party tradition. This corresponds to a serious, constructive shift on the contextualization of the Kurdish issue as not only a security issue but also a democratization issue, as well as a positive change in the attitude towards the HDP.

It is true that the Kurdish issue is a sensitive subject for not only the Kurdish political elites and people, but also all other groups, including Turkish nationalists, for a lot of reasons. The peaceful and democratic face of the Kurdish question in Turkey is often juxtaposed with its ugly and violent face, mired in decades of conflict. Several political actors consistently take the issue as a security and defense issue only, instead of an issue of democratic citizenship, equality, and individual freedoms. Particularly, the MHP has maintained a deliberate "allergy" to Kurds, enmity against the HDP and other legal Kurdish actors, and embraced this allergy as a matter of a "holy" political cause – a moral issue from which the party would never backpedal. Akşener's party needs to overcome this allergy and establish healthier, less pathological attitudes towards and relations with the legal Kurdish actors in Turkey, particularly the HDP.

Having more peaceful and healthier relations with the legal Kurdish left-wing party tradition is a collectively beneficial strategy for democratization in Turkey. The reason the 7 June 2015 election outcome could not lead to the creation of a new, peaceful coalition government was mostly because of Bahçeli's non-accommodating, exclusionist attitude towards the HDP. The repeat elections of November 1st the same year not only prevented a coalition government with compromised politics and the inclusion of the HDP, but also reversed Turkey's route back to the AKP's single-party government. The İyi Parti should be able to cooperate with the CHP, the HDP, and the SP in certain situations in the future, such as the second round of a presidential election. While

Bahçeli's MHP has continued to align with the AKP and President Erdoğan in the referendum process, Akşener's İyi Parti should put forth an opposing strategy by strategically aligning with the left and the Kurdish opposition against the AKP-MHP bloc when necessary. This alignment could be justified on the grounds that it brings Turkey back to parliamentary democracy, ends the state of emergency (OHAL), restores the rule of law/judicial independence, and expands freedoms in Turkey. This would also be in accordance with the objectives of a centrist or center-right party, which should be expected to serve as a bridge among diverging actors in a democracy.

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In particular, the İyi Parti should not refrain from openly raising rhetorical items and phrases like “Kurds” (*Kürtler*), “our Kurds” (*bizim Kürtlerimiz*), “Kurds of Turkey” (*Türkiye’nin Kürtleri*), and “our Kurdish brothers and sisters” (*Kürt kardeşlerimiz*) in the debates on the Kurdish issue. Last but not least, the İyi Parti might consider returning to the negotiation table to resolve the Kurdish issue at an appropriate time and context in the future. As it is the AKP government that initiated the peace process in the first place, the İyi Parti is not in a situation to be blamed for separatism or treason for defending a return to the negotiation table with the Kurdish actors. If this discursive defense is carried out carefully, the party base will also be likely to embrace it. Why not turn to a peace table where all actors in Turkey sit at the table together, including Kurdish actors such as Öcalan, Qandil/PKK, the HDP, the AKP, the CHP, and the İyi Parti?

Conclusion and Discussion

It is reasonable to approach Akşener and the İyi Parti phenomena with moderate optimism in Turkey. As of today, the İyi Parti gives the impression of neither a major disappointment nor a candidate leading a big, synergic explosion in Turkish politics. In short, time will tell what the party will become. However, if optimists want their hopes to turn into reality, voters in Turkey need to think in long-term prospects rather than short-term gains. The İyi Parti needs to go beyond saving the day. Therefore, instead of questioning whether the İyi Parti is able to win the elections, pass the 10 percent national electoral threshold, or transfer votes and voters from the MHP, AKP, or other parties, it is imperative to first ask how the İyi Parti can contribute to Turkish democracy.

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It is too early to speculate whether the İyi Parti will be able to accomplish some or all of the recommendations listed in this article – or for that matter to tell whether or not it will be willing to even try in the first place. The party has openly voiced commitment to organizing an umbrella party and returning to Republican values, particularly secularism, and to a limited and vague extent leaving behind the MHP legacy. However, whether the İyi Parti will be able to altogether leave behind the MHP legacy is still a question mark, especially considering the fact that the people in the party administration largely stem from MHP cadres. So far, there is no emphasis on intra-party democracy, but the party administration might consider this as a sincere and strategic maneuver in time. Finally, one should also carefully observe the İyi Parti’s take on the Kurdish issue, as the current party program reverts back to old-school, right-wing rhetoric and falls short of addressing this issue effectively and democratically.