

What to Expect from Turkey's New Secular Leadership?

By Dr. H. Akin Ünver*

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urkey's opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) has been undergoing an important and profound transformation since May 2010, which began with the resignation of Deniz Baykal, the party's chairman for more than 15 years, as a result of sex scandal allegations. Following Baykal's resignation, Kemal Kilicdaroglu was elected as the new chairman of the CHP. A former deputy chairman, he rose to fame after a series of public debates in 2008 in which he successfully challenged two senior members of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) on corruption allegations. In fact, Kilicdaroglu was such a popular figure within the party, that during the CHP rally on May 22, 2010, he was elected to chairmanship by winning 1189 votes out of a possible 1197. About 6 months later on November 3, Kemal Kilicdaroglu made his first major overhaul of the party's leadership by re-assembling the Central Executive Committee (CEC) with younger and lesser known members; a move, which was interpreted as the 'revolution of the RPP progressives'. On December 18, following the intensification of the disputes between the CHP's 'old guard' and the 'progressives', the party undertook an extraordinary general meeting, which took a further step towards the complete rectification of the party assembly along progressive lines, furthered

with yet another change in the party's CEC on December 25.

What caused the change?

While the CHP was founded by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in 1923 as the political flagship of Kemalist ideology, it has undergone several periods of transformation through its history. Most notable of these changes was Ataturk's successor Ismet Inonu's attempts in reformulating CHP as a center-left party and Inonu's successor Bulent Ecevit's further expansion of this definition into the discourse of 'Kemalist social-democratic party of the disaffected' from 1973 until the military coup in 1980. After the closure of all political parties following the 1980 military junta, CHP leadership that had sympathized with Ecevit's idea of a center-left social-democracy had established two separate parties that had later merged into the Social-Democratic People's Party (SDPP) in 1985; perhaps not surprisingly, led by Ismet Inonu's son, Erdal Inonu. However, CHP had re-emerged in 1992 under the leadership of Deniz Baykal and had merged with the SDPP; yet, Baykal's reformulation of the CHP had less to do with Bulent Ecevit's social-democracy and more to do with the CHP's transformative-secularist wartime identity of the 1920s. Under Deniz Baykal, CHP's



main agenda changed into actively polarizing the electorate along 'secular vs. Islamist' lines and thereby monopolizing the 'secularist' votes. Especially after the election of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its skill in attracting the disaffected-underprivileged electorate led the CHP to be widely perceived as an elitist party; especially through the first half of the AKP's tenure, voting behavior became a class issue in Turkey.

It was this polarizing and elitist discourse of the CHP that had alienated the electorate in general, which caused Baykal and his old comrades-in-arms to grow increasingly unpopular vis-a-vis the AKP. Gradually the mocking term 'CHP-style opposition' became the dominant and predictable characteristic of Baykal-era opposition politics, which basically implied arguing the exact opposite of what the AKP proposed, regardless of what the policy offered. This in turn, rendered Baykal's CHP to be a 'non-functionally ideological' party, aiming to highlight its ideology as a tool of electoral polarization, damaging its credibility as a policy-formulating party in the long run. As a result, the CHP failed to win any elections since its re-emergence in 1995, adding to the alienation and frustration of the party supporters. Since former chairman Deniz Baykal and his comrades-in-arms took over the leadership in 1992, CHP consistently lost general and local elections and remained in the opposition (in the 1999 elections it couldn't even get into the parliament). While the CHP could barely pass the 10% threshold through the 1990s crowded political scene, single-party government of the AKP forced the old leadership to re-construct their agenda around the discourse of a resistance against political Islam, thereby adopting the policy of active polarization of the electorate along 'secular versus Islamist' lines and increasing its votes considerably as a result. In 2002 and 2007 general elections, CHP had received 19.39% and 20.88% of the votes respectively, while in the local elections of 2004 and 2009, it got 18.38% and 23.11% respectively; latter being the highest percentage of vote Baykal leadership ever received. Nonetheless, such increase in votes was hardly due to CHP's increasing electoral campaign performance, but rather a result of a much less crowded political scene with three main parties.

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Although CHP's votes had increased, it did not cover the fact that it had been consistently losing elections. The old CHP leadership was becoming increasingly unpopular among the electorate because of this performance, and when it was in the opposition, it seemed unable to pose a serious check and balance against the ruling AKP. Furthermore, the 'old guard' was perceived to be stifling the party of young blood, thus turning away younger secularists who turned either to apathy or even voted for AKP. Therefore, both the voters and the party membership demanded a structural change and fresh blood to take over the party leadership.

What do the 'new secularists' offer?

Kemal Kilicdaroglu's election can be regarded as the yearning of the CHP supporters for the 1970s' Ecevit social-democracy, during which the party had sealed its only two election victories since 1950. To that end, Kilicdaroglu's first move was to eliminate the 'old guard' from the Central Executive Committee and Party Assembly, as well as to change the party program and bylaws – albeit with great controversy and difficulty. Second, Kilicdaroglu adopted a new makeover, making some recent public appearances with the distinguishable hat and blue shirt, characteristically worn by Ecevit in the 1970s, as a clear signal of the future direction the party is headed towards.

Ideologically, the most striking feature of the new party assembly is the absence of 'old Kemalists' – those that define Kemalism as it was formulated during the early republican wartime period, which emphasized rigidly secularist-nationalist modernization over democratization and representation. More specifically, this implied the construction of the 'citizen' along an early-20th century Franco-German model in which social and political influence of religion was minimized and an overarching ethno-linguistic identity would constitutionally and legally override other ethno-linguistic and religious identities.

34 members of the old party assembly were not included in the election list and another 12 of the old members included in the list were not elected,

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meaning that 46 out of 80 members (more than half) of the old assembly, that were associated with old Kemalism were taken out. These include very influential and symbolic figures that became almost synonymous with the old CHP, such as Onder Sav, Sahin Mengü and Oya Araslı – Onder Sav for example, was a protégée of İsmet İnönü himself. Although many of them can be regarded as ‘Kemalists’, 34 members retained from the old party assembly can be seen closer to the 1970s CHP led by Bulent Ecevit, who had attempted to reconstruct the party’s image as a ‘social-democrat alternative for the disaffected’. Therefore, much of the 34 retained members (at least in terms of image) were intra-party opposition to the ‘old Kemalists’ and had sympathized more with the 1970s’ ‘center-left’ image of the party. 10 of the 46 new members of the party assembly come from social-democratic activism, either by playing an active role at the political level, or as leaders of labor unions and associations. On the other hand, inclusion of more social-democrats into the party assembly seems to be balanced by 11 pro-business figures that come from a background of international trade, industry and private enterprise. Another important aspect of the new CHP party assembly is a distinct lack of nationalist hard-liners; only 3 party members (Suheyl Batum, Nuran Yıldız and Mehmet Farac) are known to be such. While Suheyl Batum was in the CEC as the vice-chairman after the first party revision, he was later demoted to the position of ‘director of electoral and legal affairs’ and was replaced by a social-democrat Gursel Tekin after the revision of December 25, 2010.

Individually, some of the higher-profile members of the new party assembly (that are also in the party’s Central Executive Committee) give a clearer perspective on CHP’s main agenda. Binnaz Toprak for example, a professor of sociology, was the director

of a high-profile 2006 TESEV public opinion study, which had demonstrated that Islamist reactionism was not a real threat in Turkey (only 8% of the respondents had demanded a Sharia law in Turkey and the study had marked a 9% decrease in women using headscarf) but she had nonetheless observed a pattern of ‘neighborhood pressure’ (a term coined earlier by another Turkish sociologist, Prof. Serif Mardin) that explained increasing grassroots conservatization of the Turkish society. While Prof. Toprak had previously declared her support for the AKP’s social policy, she had also explicitly conveyed that she was ‘worried’ not because that the ‘AKP would render Turkey more Islamist’, but because under the AKP, opposition and dissent was becoming increasingly marginalized and ‘otherized’, causing problems for the level of democracy in Turkey. Prof. Toprak’s involvement in the CHP can be interpreted as the party’s attempt in re-defining its secularist opposition, away from a polarizing/fear-based discourse into a more rational interpretation emphasizing the quality and practice of democratization. Another symbolic figure in the new party assembly is Sezgin Tanrikulu, a Kurdish rights advocate and a lawyer, who had sued the Turkish state at the European Court of Human Rights for the malpractice of the security forces during an intervention to the 1996 Diyarbakir prison revolt, which resulted with the death of 10 Kurdish inmates and had managed to win a compensation for the relatives of the deceased. Tanrikulu’s involvement in the party assembly can be interpreted as CHP’s departure from its statist position with regard to the Kurdish question and adopt a more human rights based perspective on the matter. Furthermore, Tanrikulu is known for his support for the ‘Ergenekon’ legal case; in an interview to Turkish daily *Taraf*, he had defined the case as a “struggle for democracy” – a 180-degree opposite view to the general consensus within the old CHP. Another notable figure in the new party assembly is Dr. Faruk Logoglu, (not in the party CEC) a prominent diplomat served as the Ambassador of Turkey in Washington DC from 2001 to 2005.

Having been re-arranged in December 2010, the new composition of the Central Executive Committee on the other hand, can be interpreted as a further purge of the old guard and their replacement by younger, comparatively more social-democrat leaning and libertarian figures. Indeed, some influential members of the new CEC, such as Gursel Tekin (considered by many as the ‘second man’ of the new CHP – replacing Onder Sav; the party’s



longest serving vice-chairman), Sezgin Tanrikulu (human rights advocate) and Izzet Cetin (workers' unions and syndicates leader) come from a background of active involvement in social-democratic politics and associations. Inclusion of such former social-democrat activists into the highest echelons of the party decision-making at the expense of the older members, (generally accused of being 'political elitists') the new leadership seems to be prioritizing on connecting the party with the disaffected segments of the population; rural electorate and the blue-collar workforce that have been throwing their lot in with the ruling AKP since 2002. The new CEC consists of 17 members, of which only 4 are parliament members. In the new CEC, economic planning was transferred to a former Undersecretary of Treasury, Faik Oztrak, whereas Osman Koruturk, a retired senior diplomat and formerly the special envoy to Iraq, was appointed in charge of foreign policy planning. Only one member of the old CEC, Erdogan Toprak was retained as the press and public relations director of the party.

While this change is interpreted by some as the social-democratization of the CHP leadership by coming down off its 'high horse', critics argue that the new leadership has become more 'technocratic'; especially in the party assembly. Such critics point to the overwhelming majority of experts, academics and specialists within the new party leadership, which makes the party look more like a European Commission experts' panel, rather than a representative political party; a configuration that may render RPP unable to connect with the society at large.

New CHP's aims and support

Concrete manifestations of the new CHP's policy outlook came in a series of public initiatives. The first of these initiatives is a welfare program called the 'family insurance', which, according to Kemal Kilicdaroglu is "one of the most important projects" of the new CHP. According to the plan, which was introduced on March 8, party volunteers will prepare a 'national poverty inventory' through a door-by-door survey, making a list of the households that are in real need. Those households with an income of less than minimum wage will be assigned a monthly aid on par with the minimum wage – and this

monthly payment will be transferred to the bank account of what CHP defines as the "family member who knows the needs of the family best"; which will be a female member of the household. This way, the new CHP aims to give poor households a chance to spend based on their real needs; a criticism of the AKP's policies of distributing certain freebies before the elections. All aid will be transferred through the state-agency 'family insurance fund'.

A further extension of this initiative is a specific program directed towards the economic amelioration of the predominantly Kurdish areas of the south-east, in a program called the 'regional development and democracy' project. Within the general framework of CHP's civil society initiatives, some of its main priorities are listed as:

- ◆ Ending the civil-society's dependence on government funds
- ◆ Introducing a law that will facilitate the participation of civil-society leaders in democratic decision-making processes
- ◆ Eliminating bureaucratic hurdles against the freedom to establish associations, also introducing tax exemption to civil-society organizations
- ◆ Introducing courses in schools, teaching and promoting civil-society and organizations
- ◆ Encouraging female participation and promoting affirmative action in civil-society participation

Also, the new CHP leadership wasted no time to prepare a draft new Constitution, whose 26 articles were amended as a result of the public referendum that had taken place in September 2010. Rather than directly challenging the AKP's plans for a new Constitution, CHP's then vice-chairman Suheyl Batum had indicated that CHP would only "offer guidance" to the AKP, emphasizing that the preparation of a new Constitution should be a non-partisan issue, necessitating the cooperation of all political parties.

High initial support, recently wavering

Although the new leadership had met with support initially, this support seems to be wavering more recently, as the electorate is beginning to expect more concrete policy positions from

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the party. Public opinion surveys conducted right after the election of Kemal Kilicdaroglu to chairmanship initially showed that this leadership change was well-received. In a poll conducted by the Istanbul-based polling organization SONAR, in May 30, 2010, CHP emerged as the most popular political party by 32.48%, followed by the ruling AKP, which got 31.09% of the respondents’ vote. This poll was particularly important, because right after the leadership change, CHP had emerged as the most popular party in any poll for the first time since 2002. In another poll, conducted by MetroPoll in May 2010, 52.3% of the respondents claimed that the leadership change benefited the CHP, while in another question, 63.6% of the respondents declared their support for the change in CHP leadership and their replacement with new figures. Among those that had claimed they have never voted for the CHP, 22.5% stated that they would vote for the CHP for the first time, after the election of Kemal Kilicdaroglu as the chairman.

However, due to an increasing politicization of newly emerging polling organizations and polls themselves, such figures need to be analyzed in comparison to other polls in different polling periods. For example, another survey in July 2010, this time conducted by Andy-Ar, yielded less flattering results for CHP (26.8%), which trailed the AKP at 41.9%. Furthermore, support for the new CHP leadership seems to be wavering as time goes by and the party elite seems to be lacking consensus on two of the most pressing policy issues facing Turkey 6 months prior to the general elections: the Kurdish question and the headscarf debate. This electoral perception gained more ground as Kilicdaroglu keeps avoiding making statements on the party’s position with regard to these two questions in his party rally speeches and press releases. In a more recent MetroPoll December 2010 survey, the ruling AKP emerged as the most popular party by 37.3%, while the CHP followed by 30.1%. Furthermore, while 41.3% of the respondents defined Kilicdaroglu as a ‘more successful leader than Deniz Baykal’, respondents of the same survey expressed their lack

of trust towards CHP’s ability to solve the Kurdish problem and the headscarf controversy; 71.9% of the respondents stated that ‘Kilicdaroglu cannot resolve the Kurdish question’ – 62.8% had conveyed their belief that he will not be able to resolve the headscarf issue in a survey conducted by the same group in May 2010.

What can the new leadership do?

The changes CHP has been going through since May 2010, may be interpreted by some as an ‘intra-party revolution’ by the pragmatist-progressives against the more ideological old guard. However, although CHP’s long presence in the opposition has been characterized as a leadership problem, according to the critics, CHP’s main problem is its inability to go through a structural identity shift and to locate itself on a democratic political continuum. Debates on the ‘secularist change’ must understand that the party was not established as an ‘ordinary political party’, but rather as a political tool of a socially transformative-reformist mentality, which traces its intellectual roots deep into the late-18th century Ottoman Empire. Therefore, the CHP never saw itself as a standard political party functioning in a democratic political system, but rather as an extension of a ‘sacred social mission’. CHP’s new leadership change can be seen as the manifestation of the party’s understanding that discourses of social engineering end up creating resentment in a democratic political system. To that end, Kilicdaroglu in person appears to understand why exactly CHP has to change away from a ‘party of coercive modernization’; at least so far his actions and speeches point towards this direction. However, some segments of the party’s membership and the electorate still see CHP as a transcendental political presence and the continuity of a long reformist tradition. Furthermore, Kilicdaroglu seems to be purposefully avoiding making references to two of Turkey’s deepest identity problems in his speeches; the Kurdish question and the headscarf problem. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether the CHP can re-define itself ideologically within a democratic political system, its outlook towards the Kurdish and the headscarf questions and how successfully Kilicdaroglu can rally party members and the electorate around this new identity. **PR**

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* **Dr. Ünver** is the Ertegun Lecturer of Modern Turkish Studies at the Department of Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University.