reflektif

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Popular Will against Democracy: Populist Autocratization in Turkey
Halkın İradesi Demokrasiye Karşı: Türkiye'de Popülist Otoriterleşme

Abstract

In this article, I study the relationship of the Justice and Development Party's (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi*, AKP) populism-in-power and democracy, from a comparative and historical perspective, and based on a critical engagement with the populism literature. I begin by highlighting the political institutional expression of the populist political vision (to reflect the popular will in power), which prioritizes competitive elections among a variety of modern democratic institutions and mechanisms. Based on this perspective, I outline a particular populist route to competitive (or electoral) authoritarianism: when in power, because populists exalt elections and undermine existing liberal democratic mechanisms that bridge people to power, they deprive citizens of the power to hold rulers accountable. I then trace the lineage of the populist political imagination in Turkey, demonstrating the continuities and discontinuities between the Democrat Party's (*Demokrat Parti,* DP) and the AKP's conceptions of the people and democracy. I argue that despite these parties' differences on the level of the politicization of cultural divisions, there is a crucial continuity: the equalization of democracy with an exalted elected executive branch. Finally, I concentrate on the impact of the AKP's populism-in-power on the Turkish political regime. I argue that because the AKP came to power in a defective democracy (with extra-democratic checks on elected rulers and prone to concentration of power), by 2011, the party managed to reframe Turkish political institutions according to its right-wing populist vision of democracy, an authoritarian regime with competitive elections.

Öz

Bu makalede Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisini'nin (AKP) iktidardaki popülizmiyle demokrasinin ilişkisini, karşılaştırmalı ve tarihsel bir perspektiften ve popülizm literatürüne eleştirel bir bakış açısıyla inceliyorum. Yazıya ilk olarak çeşitli demokratik kurumlar ve mekanizmalar arasında rekabetçi seçimlere öncelik veren popülist siyaset anlayışının siyasi kurumsal ifadesini (iktidardaki halk iradesini yansıtmak için) vurgulayarak başlıyorum. Bu perspektife dayanarak, rekabetçi (veya seçimli) otoriterliğe giden bir popülist rota belirliyorum: popülist iktidarlar, seçimleri yücelttikleri ve yurttaşlarla yönetim arasında köprüler kuran liberal demokratik mekanizmaları baltaladıkları için, vatandaşları, yöneticileri sorumlu tutma gücünden mahrum ediyorlar. Daha sonra, Demokrat Parti (DP) ile AKP'nin halk ve demokrasi anlayışlarının süreklilik ve farklılık gösterdiği yerleri belirleyerek Türkiye'deki popülist siyasi tahayyülün izini sürüyorum. Bu partilerin kültürel bölünmeleri siyasallaştırma düzeyindeki farklılıklara rağmen, önemli bir ortaklıklarının olduğunu iddia ediyorum: demokrasinin seçilmiş olmakla yüceltilmiş bir yürütme organıyla eşitlenmesi. Son olarak, AKP'nin iktidardaki popülizminin Türkiye siyasal rejimi üzerindeki etkisine odaklanıyorum. Kusurlu bir demokraside iktidara gelmesinden dolayı (seçilmiş yöneticiler üzerinde demokrasi dışı kontrol mekanizmalarının olduğu ve güç yoğunlaşmasına yatkın), AKP'nin, 2011 yılına kadar, Türkiye siyasal kurumlarını, otoriter bir rejimle rekabetçi seçimleri birleştiren sağ popülist vizyonuna göre, yeniden düzenlemeyi başardığını iddia ediyorum.

Keywords

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Introduction

Although populism is a controversial social science concept, currently there seems to be an acknowledgement in both social scientific and public debates that populist parties, movements or leaders are on the rise (Judis, 2016; Rooduijn, 2019; Lacey, 2019). In fact, in the last two decades, populists have been gaining momentum not only in populism's traditional stronghold, Latin America, but also, they have been acquiring power or reconfiguring party systems well beyond the region, including in consolidated democracies in Europe and North America (Roberts, 2007; Rooduijn, 2019; Lacey, 2019). Since its transition to a competitive regime after the Second World War, Turkey has also been one of the prominent, if understudied, cases where populists have constituted a major political force. In the 1950s, during the earlier wave of populism (the 2nd wave), Turkey experienced right-wing populism-in-power during the rule of the DP (1950-1960) (Sunar, 1983, pp. 2079-2086; Sayarı, 2002, pp. 77-80; Taşkın, 2007, pp. 91-103; Sözen, 2010, pp. 378-388). In the last wave of populism, Turkey produced another major case of populism-in-power with the AKP's right-wing populism.

To different degrees, these two single party rule periods satisfy major components of most established definitions of populism (Ostiguy, 1998; Mudde, 2004; Moffitt, 2016). However, despite various recent studies of global populist waves within the literature (Woods, 2014; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 21-41), the DP case has not become one of the acknowledged cases for the second wave of populism like its contemporaries, which include among others, the cases of the Vargas (Brazil) and Peron (Argentina) governments[1]. On the other hand, conceptualizations of the AKP as an instance of populism have taken a rather convoluted route. Until well into the AKP's third term in office (2011-2015), the concept of populism did not receive serious scholarly attention as a central component of this party's ideology. In fact, with the exception of a few early examples that named the party's ideology as "neo-conservative populism" (Sözen, 2008; also see: 2010, pp. 415-423; 2011, pp. 7-23), or "neoliberal populism" (Yıldırım, 2009), or the party's political strategy as "conservative populism" (Taşkın, 2008, p. 54), the debate centered mainly on whether the AKP was a conservative democratic or an Islamist party, and/or whether it represented the continuation of the center-right tradition in Turkey, or the Islamic one (Tepe, 2005; Dağı, 2008; Özbudun and Hale, 2010; Heper, 2013). Yet recently, after the deepening of the AKP's authoritarian politics, and in line with "the recent explosion of populism studies" (Rooduijn, 2018, p. 363) which resulted in response to the rise of populist leaders/parties/movements in Europe and the US, the AKP is now widely considered to be a major case of this global phenomenon (Elçi, 2019; Çelik and Balta, 2020).

After outlining a particular populist route to competitive (or electoral) authoritarianism,[2] my first argument is on the populist conception of democracy in Turkey, and the AKP's place in it. I maintain that, from the beginning of its rule, the party has been in one crucial respect a clear continuation of the center-right tradition in Turkey: its populism. To demonstrate

this, I trace the continuity of the main aspects of populism in Turkey from the DP period (1950 to 1960) to the AKP period (2002 to present), most importantly, their shared populist vision of democracy and this vision's political institutional expression. I also note that, although the social content of their populisms differed, and these two parties faced different institutional constraints (most importantly different constitutional frameworks), their shared vision of populist democracy was nonetheless instrumental in the autocratization processes of both of these periods.

The second focus of the paper is on the regime dynamics under the rule of the AKP. On this issue, until recently, the hegemonic position within the academic and intellectual debates interpreted these dynamics using the language of democratization and its challenges. In such accounts, Turkey was seen as democratizing, or experiencing problems/challenges with its democratic consolidation process (İnsel, 2003; Hale and Özbudun, 2010; Müftüler-Baç and Keyman, 2012). There were early exceptions to this position, for example, those that claimed that after 2007, Turkey started moving "from tutelary democracy to populist competitive authoritarianism" (Sözen, 2008, p. 80), or that from 2007 on, the AKP was "on its way to institutionalizing an electoral authoritarian regime" (Sözen, 2010, p. 423), or that by 2011, uncertainties in Turkish politics rendered Turkey's "affinities with 'hybrid democracies' more striking than ever" (Aslan-Akman, 2012, p. 92). However, since the 2014 harsh government crackdown on the Gezi uprisings, and concomitant with Turkey's steep decline on most political regime indexes, there is now a growing body of literature, and a growing consensus, maintaining that Turkey is transitioning to some form of authoritarianism under the rule of the AKP (Özbudun, 2014; Somer, 2016; Başer and Öztürk, 2017).

In line with assessments that point out the earlier authoritarian slide in the AKP period, I argue that an autocratization process started during the second term of the party, and by its third electoral victory in 2011, the AKP had already managed to design Turkish political institutions according to its populist authoritarian vision. Therefore, based on this perspective, politics in Turkey after 2011 should be seen as politics in an authoritarian-heavy mixed regime and major political crises as critical moments in the autocratization process that was already under way. As such, events like the Gezi uprisings and the government's heavy-handed reaction to it in 2013, the December 17-25 crisis of 2013 and the government's response to it, the repeat elections in 2015, and the constitutional referendum in 2017, do not constitute moments where the AKP government had a populist or authoritarian turn (or shift or drift) (Özbudun, 2014). Instead, they are instances where a populist government that had already amassed an abundance of authoritarian instruments, intervened into politics in ways that would be impossible in a democracy, even if the government's actions in these critical moments furthered autocratization.

Below, I begin by briefly defining populism and democracy, and then overview the literature on their relationship, locating my argument in it. I then trace the continuities and discontinuities of the populist conception of politics between the DP and the AKP in Turkey. Finally, I explicate populist autocratization in Turkey under the AKP.

Popular Will in Power against Democracy: Populism and Autocratization

For the most part, the academic debate on populism has revolved around three issues: the concept's definition, the origins of populism (the reasons for the emergence of populist parties/leaders/movements), and populism's impact on political regimes. In this section, I briefly define the two main concepts of the article, populism and democracy. I then outline my main argument on their relationship, locating it within the literature on populism's impact on democracies. I overview the origins of populism debate later in the article when I discuss the emergence of the AKP's populism.

Populism

On the nature of populism, there are accounts that define populism as a political strategy, style, discourse, or ideology (Ostiguy, 1998; Weyland, 2001; Mudde, 2004; Moffitt, 2016). I make use of an ideological definition of populism by distinguishing its social and political visions. Mudde defines what I call the social vision of populism (drawing boundaries internal to the society) as follows: "a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite'" (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Also, in line with this definition, I view "populism's political vision (and its conception of democracy) as the reflection of the popular will in politics, or as making the popular will preponderant" (Sözen, 2019: 268). Kaltwasser argues for this ideational definition of populism in comparative research, referring to its ability to travel well between different time periods and contexts (2015: 191). But also, this definition of populism as a thin-centered ideology makes better sense of why disparate groups with divergent substantive ideologies (conservatives and liberals or left and right-wingers) are often capable of coming together in different contexts -- against the social or political groups that they deem the establishment, or the elite. In other words, this definition of populism captures what more mechanical definitions cannot adequately account for: the appeal of populism. This appeal is centered in the cross-cutting democratic allure of populism's core concepts of the popular will, people's power, and the righteousness of popular values. This illusion of populist democracy often coalesces disparate groups that maintain a strong disdain of what they conceive to be the degenerated elite or the establishment – as well as the large segments of the society that they view as culturally associated with these anti-populist political actors.

Finally, although it is not part of the definition, populism's political vision (or its conception of democracy) has a clear institutional expression as well. Populists primarily rely on competitive elections as the mechanism to reflect the popular will in power, and they view other aspects of modern democracy, like constitutional mechanisms (if they are designed as checks on power), as redundant or as obstacles against the translation of popular will in power (Sözen, 2019). One salient example of the populist emphasis on the ballot box as a popular-will revelation mechanism is the description of real democracy by Argentina's popular leader Peron as "the expression of the people's will in free elections" (1950, p. 180). De la Torre makes a similar observation for two contemporary cases of populist rule: "President Rafael Correa of Ecuador views elections as the ultimate expression of the people's will, as did the late Hugo Chavez of Venezuela" (2015, p. 13).

Democracy

In this article, I utilize a procedural definition of democracy that emphasizes competitive elections (Schumpeter, 1962) and oppositional liberties - freedom of expression, information, and association – which make those elections genuinely competitive (Dahl, 1989, p. 233). In addition, modern democracies include constitutional mechanisms of checks and balances along with relatively autonomous state institutions (Bobbio, 2005, p. 13). As a result, modern democracy is built on a complex system of relationships between different political and state elites. Moreover, in a modern democracy, the coexistence of different power centers that check each other protects the liberties that make it possible for the opposition to challenge the government-in-power. This protection, in turn, ensures a level playing field between the ruling groups and the opposition.

A critical issue about modern representative democracy defined as such, is that it is based on the competition between different factions of political elite that rule with considerable autonomy after they come to power. Also, separate dimensions of modern representative democracy (elections, oppositional liberties, and constitutional mechanisms) are not by themselves necessarily democratic or authoritarian. For example, the electoral mechanism tends to generate rulers that are broadly autonomous from the ruled/citizens, "because elections are not authorizing rulers on concrete matters (no specific binding mandates and formal instructions), but authorizing them to rule in general" (Sözen, 2019, p. 274; for a broader discussion of the issue, see: Manin, 1997, pp. 266-268). Also, other dimensions of modern democracy, like individual or collective liberties and constitutional mechanisms of checks and balances, are originally designed to protect individual liberties or produce good/stable government. However, they fulfill a democratic function when they restrict the autonomy of the electorally authorized faction of the ruling elite, to an extent forcing them into giving an account of their actions to the general public (Manin, 1997; also see: Sözen, 2019).

Based on these definitions, below, I locate my argument on the relationship of democracy and populism within the general literature.

Ideal Populist Democracy as Competitive Authoritarianism

On the relationship between democracy and populism, among the theoretical studies, there are accounts that consider populism as ambivalent about democracy (Kaltwasser, 2012) or potentially democratic (Mouffe, 2000; Laclau, 2005). Still, a majority of scholars see populism as a threat to democracy (Abst and Rummens, 2007; Espejo, 2015, Müller, 2016). Among the more empirically oriented research, Levitsky and Loxton use a political strategic definition of populism, and connect populism to the emergence of competitive authoritarianism (2013). Mudde and Kaltwasser, on the other hand, employ a definition of populism as a thin-centered ideology and argue that populism can be both a threat and a corrective on democracy (2012).

In this paper, I use Mudde and Kaltwasser's ideological definition, but unlike them, I posit that populism is an authoritarian threat, and populists' ideal regime type fits well with competitive or electoral authoritarianism. This is because populists-in-power bring out authoritarian aspects of competitive elections, unless they engage in institutional innovation (outside the spectrum of modern democracy) and build alternative populist democratic institutions that would form and then translate popular will to power (participatory mechanisms such as citizenship assemblies). This is the case because populists legitimize the eradication of constitutional limits in front of the elected faction of rulers, as well as the restriction of oppositional liberties, in the name of reflecting the popular will in power. In other words, the populist claim of reflecting the people's will in power carries the potential of "exalting elected rulers and generating strong rulers and weak citizens" (Sözen, 2019, p. 269). This fits well with what Bermeo names 'executive aggrandizement' as a mechanism of "democratic decline" (2016).

Therefore, first and foremost, because populists denigrate institutions of checks and balances and oppositional liberties, they end up emphasizing the authoritarian features of the very mechanism of competitive elections that they deem as the most democratic. But also, there is a second mechanism that connects populists' vision of democracy to democratic erosion (or autocratization in a democracy), and it is related to populist leadership. As emphasized in liberal political theory (Holmes, 1995), leaders should practice self-restraint for the modern representative framework to function as democracy. However, populism carries the danger of turning this liberal democratic virtue of self-restraint into a democratic vice. This is because populist leadership claims to reflect popular will in power, and as such self-restraint would mean betrayal of the power that is "entrusted to" (Canovan, 1999, p. 8) them by the people. Thus, populist leaders should be expected to do what they can and not what the norms and conventions of modern democracies stipulate that they should do.

Both of these features of populism were in place in Turkey's recent autocratization. Below, I trace the ideational origins of the AKP's populism first and then discuss AKP's populism and Turkey's recent populist path to authoritarianism.

The Ideational Origins of the AKP's Populism: The Democrat Party

In this section, I focus on the DP's use of core populist concepts and its populist vision of democracy during its rule between 1950 and 1960. I maintain that these core populist concepts are later taken up by the AKP leadership, and most importantly DP's executive-centric conception of democracy.

The 'National Will' in Kemalism: Non-populist conception

The DP was formed in 1946 as the most significant opposition to Turkey's founding party, the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) that ruled the country as a single party regime from 1923 to 1950. The CHP's official ideology, Kemalism, as articulated by its founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, maintained that for Turkey's political survival as an independent country, Turkish society needed to be transformed into a homogeneous and civilized country. Homogeneity implied a nation without social conflicts and pluralism; civilizationism, on the other hand, was a set of principles that aimed at becoming European in all social and political facets of life (Köker, 2000, pp. 133-137; Bora, 2017, pp. 129-139; see for the terminology of homogeneity and civilizationism: Sözen, 2010, pp. 84-132).

Kemalists also used extensively the concept of the national (or sometimes popular) will, but in a non-populist framework. In fact, Kemalism was an anti-populist ideology for two reasons. On the one hand, it was a transformative ideology, and as such it did not exalt the presumed values of the actually existing Turkish society; on the other hand, Kemalism was not based on extracting a faction of the Turkish society and naming it as the pure people against another faction of it, pejoratively labeled the elite. Instead, it was a nationalist homogenizing ideology that conceived of the national will as the expression of the whole society against external (external to the society) forces -- these forces were other countries, the caliphate, the sultanate but not other groups within the society (for a relevant discussion on the Kemalist conception of the Republic, see: Parla, 1994, pp. 136-138; for the differences of Kemalist and populist conceptions of national/popular will, see: Sözen, 2010, pp. 274-284). The DP's political ideology was shaped by the opportunities and limitations provided by this foundational ideology of Turkey.

DP's Populist "National Will"

The DP was formed by four dissident former CHP members, with Celal Bayar being the "pre-eminent personality" (Sayarı, 2002, p. 68), as he held various important positions during the single party period, including minister of the economy and prime minister (Eroğul, 1998, pp. 29-30). After the 1950 election victory that started 10 years of single-party rule, Bayar ended up becoming the president (1950-1960), while the prime ministry (1950-1960) and the party's chairmanship went to another one of the four, Adnan Menderes. Below, I briefly discuss the main ideological themes of this party based on these two figures.

During the 1950 electoral campaign, the DP tried to frame its position as against the authoritarian and transformative single-party regime's policies, while remaining loyal to the foundational principles of the Republic (Sayarı, 2002, p. 69). Also, both the CHP and the DP were run by elites with backgrounds in the secularist-nationalist single-party period, and their differences were minimal on the left-right axis. In spite of these similarities, the DP managed to differentiate itself considerably from the CHP on the axis of populism versus anti-populism (Sözen, 2010, p. 380). From very early on, DP leadership started to transform the previously non-populist terms of "national will" (*milli irade*) or the "people's will" (*halkın iradesi*) into populist ones. For example, right after the 1950 electoral campaign, where the DP used the slogan of "enough, let the people speak", Menderes repeatedly emphasized the legitimacy that national will brings, connecting it to the majority votes in the election (Menderes 1991 [1950], pp. 15-16). Menderes expressed this idea of national will as something that the society transfers to the rulers through the majority of votes as follows: "although there were not even superficial reasons for it, the fact that [the opposition] attacked us from the first day on, shows the hate that they harbor for the national will that did not elect them" (Menderes 1991 [1951], p. 46).

In terms of the DP's populist social vision, the party started to frame the people, empirically composed of peasants and merchants, in an antagonistic relationship with the "tyrannical [*ceberrut*] bureaucratic elites" (Sunar, 1983, p. 2086; also see: Sayarı, 2002, p. 79). But the social/cultural references of this anti-elitist language did not signify large social groups as anti-people, but instead were mainly directed against the CHP, bureaucrats, and intellectuals. The CHP, according to Menderes, was still under the illusion of being the owners of the country: "they [the CHP] lose all the elections and still say that 'this country is ours'" (1991 [1954], p. 160). Also, he criticized "the opposition in the bureaucracy, press, and universities as harboring tendencies for 'enlightened despotism' and not respecting the votes of the people that they see as 'a useless crowd'" (Bora, 2005, p. 487).

However, right-wing populisms' hyperpoliticization of social/cultural divisions was not a pronounced feature of the DP's populism. The party did not explicitly identify the religious masses as the authentic Turkish people nor did it construct secular social groups as the anti-people, alienated from their own culture. Sunar argues that Islam was available as a tool for

sectional populist mobilization, however, due to limitations like their own background in the Atatürk period, or the presence of a strong secular elite, Islam as a tool for populist mobilization was not activated by the party (1983, pp. 2079-2080). Menderes, for example, argues that they "would remove measures that are heavy like a millstone in people's conscience and that are not embraced by them" (quoted in Bora, 2005, p. 496). However, the DP did not go further than moderating the cultural modernization of the Kemalist project (*civilizationism*) and only "objected to the social engineering project" (Bora, 2005, p. 498).

Nevertheless, the DP's populist vision of politics and democracy was very clear. DP leadership consistently employed an understanding of democracy as the popular will in power, and Menderes himself "equated democracy and democratic politics with 'the national will of the people'" (Sayarı, 2002, p. 88). This populist political vision, in turn, delegitimized oppositional liberties, and found its institutional expression in the exaltation of the elected rulers. Bayar, for example, argues that: "democracy is based on the assumption that the majority is more intelligent, more talented, and more virtuous. That is why nations refuse to be ruled but aim to rule themselves. If the axiom that the majority would not be wrong did not exist, there would not be a democracy" (2006, p. 41).

In political institutional terms, DP leaders envisioned a "real democracy" where national will is directly linked with the ballot box, and in their vision, all other mechanisms of modern democracies that make elections an institution of democracy, were pulling the regime away from that "real democracy". Menderes, states that "to give immunity, which means a kind of autonomy to the judiciary, means taking away jurisdiction from the people" and connects the existence of autonomous judiciary in the West to their class society, which Turkey lacks (quoted in Bora, 2002, p. 502). Bayar, along the same lines, juxtaposes "real democracy" with autonomous institutions and a system of checks and balances:

> An idea that creates a lot of conflict is as follows: will Turkey implement a democracy that is based on [the idea that] 'sovereignty belongs to the people without any condition and reservation, and the nation makes use of it directly', or is it going to be based on 'soft popular sovereignty' which relies on autonomous institutions, and regulation, as there are examples in certain places [Western Europe] (2010, p. 11).

He further argued that:

> [Because European societies have conflicting classes] instead of a real democracy that gathers its foundational legitimacy from the people and governmental legitimacy from a majority, they needed to rely on a 'balance democracy' that checks election based popular sovereignty with autonomous institutions [he states that these are "courts and others"] (2006, p. 45).

Therefore, DP leaders' democratic institutional imagination fit perfectly with a populist vision of democracy, which enhances the power of the elected faction of the rulers over the ruled and renders them unaccountable (and thereby weakens citizens). However, with their backgrounds in the CHP and the Kemalist ideological paradigm, unlike the AKP, they could neither hyper-politicize the social nor construct the secular social segments as the anti-people. As such, although in the DP's ideology there was anti-elitism, an appeal to a conception of the popular will that can be reflected in power through competitive elections, and an understanding of oppositional liberties and constitutional limits as impediments against real democracy, the DP leaders' conception of the people (and elites or anti-people) did not have a strong cultural content. In other words, they did not construct the antagonistic relationship within the society in outwardly cultural terms.

Finally, the longer the DP stayed in power, the more the interaction between the political ideas of the party's rulers with the political institutions of the time, moved Turkey towards a competitive authoritarian regime. The existing 1924 constitutional framework that was in effect when the DP came to power did not include an effective system of checks balances that would limit the majority party in the parliament (Özbudun, 2000, pp.52-53; Demirel, 2011, p. 65). Also, given the highly majoritarian electoral system of the period and party discipline, the aggrandized executive was already inscribed in the political institutional framework. As such, DP leadership did not even need to change the constitutional framework to carry out their populist authoritarian vision of democracy. Still, DP leaders forced even these weak constitutional limits. For example, in 1960, shortly before the military coup, DP formed a parliamentary investigation committee with judicial powers, which was basically tasked to inquire into the opposition's and oppositional press's activities (Eroğul, 1998, pp. 234-238; Demirel, 2011, pp. 315-328).

The AKP's Populism and Autocratization in Turkey

From the very beginning of their rule, the AKP leaders claimed to be continuing "the mission of the DP" (Taşkın, 2002, p. 53). For example, in 2003, Erdoğan stated that "the people gave us the mission of realizing the democracy for the first time since Menderes. Ours is the Second Menderes era." (quoted in Taşkın, 2008, p. 63*fn*). In fact, Hale and Özbudun argue that "AKP seems to be solidly rooted in the center to center-right of the political spectrum" (2010, p. 43), and also "it is difficult to characterize the AKP as an Islamist… or 'moderate Islamist' party"; instead, they characterize it as a conservative democratic party, whose conservatism is "more cultural and social than political or ideological" (2010, p. 29). However, as discussed above, the center-right tradition in Turkey also included an authoritarian executive-centric populism and it is perhaps in that sense that the AKP's continuity with the center-right tradition in Turkey (particularly with the DP) is most pronounced. Also, this populist element in the AKP's ideological platform had a profound impact on recent Turkish regime dynamics (autocratization).

Below, I briefly describe the AKP's populism, the conditions of its emergence, and then conclude by arguing that the autocratization in Turkey under this party's rule can be explained by the interaction of ideas and institutions.

The AKP's populism

The AKP was formed in 2001 by the reformist wing of the Turkish Islamist movement. The party came to power in 2002 with a clear parliamentary majority and also secured parliamentary majorities in 2007, and 2011. In 2015, on the other hand, the party initially failed to gain the parliamentary majority in the June elections; however, after the election, it managed to control the process of government formation and regained its parliamentary majority with the repeat elections of November 2015.The leader of the party, Erdoğan, became Prime Minister in March 2003, and was then elected to the position of president in 2014. Finally, in 2017, he led a campaign to successfully transform the form of government to a hyper-presidential system, and was subsequently elected to that position in 2018.

From early on, Erdoğan and the AKP leadership made use of themes from the DP's populism, but placed far greater emphasis on the politicization of cultural differences than their predecessor. Like all populists and the DP leadership, for Erdoğan, "popular will" ("national will") is a sacred concept. He claims that there is "nothing higher than the national will in the human realm" (2011 [2009], p. 456), and that popular will also constitutes the core of democracy: "democracy is the reflection of the popular will in power" (2011 [2004], p. 143).

On the social vision of populism though, unlike the DP leadership, Erdoğan hyper-politicizes the social, constructing secular citizens in juxtaposition to conservative Sunni Muslim Turkish citizens. While the specific groups that he targeted as anti-people have changed at times, this category has always included the opposition, mainly composed of the secular media and other secular political or state actors who, he argues, are trying to corrupt the popular will from their "ivory towers" (2011 [2003], p. 567; 2011 [2005], p. 208), or "glass mansions" (2011 [2006], p. 160). But also, his construction of the people and the anti-people went beyond these categories, seeking, through the use of overlapping lower class and religious cultural references, to form "the people" as a politically and culturally oppressed majority. Sontag argues in 2003 that, "Erdoğan styled himself as an authentic representative of the masses," quoting him as saying: "In this country, there is a segregation of Black Turks and White Turks…Your brother Tayyip belongs to the Black Turks." (2003, p. 45). Moreover, and again highlighting his divergence from the DP leadership, Erdoğan was clear on the cultural and religious differences between those he deemed the authentic people, and the alienated elites (White Turks). For example, in his first presidential candidacy speech (2014), he explains why he was engaged in politics. In this speech, loaded with cultural and religious symbolism, he constructed himself as pursuing politics for the downtrodden, the culturally oppressed, and those who suffered at the hands of secularists:

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> Because we were studying in İmam Hatip [religious vocational high schools where he studied], they insulted us… Because we were giving the salute of God, they called us reactionaries [*mürteci*], because we were praying, they called us reactionaries [*gerici*]… They found strange and they called reactionaries those who enter their homes taking their shoes off, sitting down on the floor, crossing their legs to eat… They made life unbearable to our wives, daughters, and sisters who wear head-scarves in accordance with their faith.

Therefore, to Erdoğan, politics is a battleground between the authentic yet oppressed people (religious, conservative Sunni masses) of Turkey and the degenerated anti-people, "elites who are detached from the people's values" (Erdoğan, 2012 [2010], p. 108; 2011 [2010], p. 378; 2012 [2011], p. 608).

As per the political vision of Erdoğan's populism, very much like the DP leadership before him, he claims that popular will is transferable to government through elections, as he states repeatedly "the national will is a nation's proclamation of its preferences through elections…" (2011 [2009], p. 364), and in those election the people "hand over" or "consign" their will to the rulers (2011 [2004], p. 143; 2012 [2009], p. 396). Therefore, according to Erdoğan, as other populists from different time and spaces have claimed, "democracy means the government of the people by its authentic representatives" (as Palacio, a Peronist, declared in 1941, quoted in Schwartz, 2009, p. 117). In fact, this view of democracy and elections as the measure of authenticity has gained surprising allies for the AKP. For example, Ahmet İnsel, a left-wing liberal intellectual, just after the AKP's first electoral victory, argued that under the AKP the Turkish political regime can normalize and democratize, getting rid of the fetters of the Republican elite. He added that "the AKP's 'unstoppable march to power' could be understood as a more authentic and humble continuation of the process that started with Özal… Among the political leaders prominent in the history of the Turkish Republic, Erdoğan was the person most clearly and authentically 'one of the people'" (2003, p. 303).

Finally, very much like the Bayar's conception of "real democracy", in Erdoğan's populist vision of politics, constitutional mechanisms that limit elected representatives are illegitimate. Instead, their function should be to serve the people, by becoming the instruments of the elected rulers. For example, before the 2010 constitutional referendum that increased executive branch's control over the judiciary, Erdoğan repeatedly claimed during his campaign that opponents of the constitutional amendments cannot "digest" these changes because "the judiciary, which used to be their back garden, is now going to be the nation's [people's] front garden" (2010, Istanbul meeting). A year later, after the successful reconfiguration of the judiciary and just before his party's third consecutive electoral victory in 2011, Erdoğan argued that, "a handful of elite" used to say to the people, "you should not interfere with the government, you don't know democracy", but now, "the nation took control of the government… Politics under tutelage has ended. Today, democracy became meaningful. The national [popular] will start to work in the most potent way" (2011, Sakarya Meeting).

In sum, as in other cases of populism-in-power, and also in line with the DP tradition, Erdoğan closely links one ambivalently democratic mechanism of modern democracies (elections) with a concept he sacralizes: the popular/national will. On the other hand, other components of modern democracy (the oppositional liberties and constitutional limitations on the rulers) are reformulated as illegitimate. As such, his populist conception of democracy exalts the electorally authorized faction of the rulers, potentially rendering them unaccountable, and weakening citizens, very much like the DP's "real democracy". However, the AKP's populism also contains a "redemptive" (Canovan, 1999) promise for the culturally and politically oppressed majority, and as such, it potentially extends authoritarianism, and oppression beyond the political realm.

Below, I discuss the conditions of the emergence of the AKP's populism and then connect it to the populist autocratization process in Turkey. I argue that the Turkish political constitutional framework at the onset of AKP rule was not a full modern democracy, but a defective democracy. This particular constitutional system was, on the one hand, prone to the concentration of power in the hands of elected executive branch, requiring self-restraint from elected officers to be sustainable. On the other hand, the checks that this system instituted over the elected government were not democratic checks (military's veto power) and this provided avenues for the appeal of the populist authoritarian promise of democracy.

Conditions of the Emergence of the AKP's Populism

Empirical studies of the emergence of populism tend to bring forward either demand or supply-side explanations. The former group of explanations locates the growing frustrations, grievances, and resentments of citizens as the source of the resurgence of populism, thus highlighting the availability of social groups potentially receptive to the populist appeal (Germani, 1967; Kriesi, 2014; also see: Kaltwasser, 2015). The latter, supply-side explanations, argue mainly that political factors, such as the party system or populist leaders, are the critical components that facilitate the emergence of the phenomenon (Mair, 2002; Roberts, 2012).

In Turkey, before 2002, both supply and demand-side factors were in play. The AKP arose in the context of the deep economic crisis of 2001, and the ensuing collapse of the party system. These developments occurred in tandem with an incorporation crisis: the inability of the system, instituted after the soft-coup of February 28, 1997, to deal with the rising power of the devout bourgeoisie and the political Islamic movement, as well as the more diffuse religious conservative sentiment (for the incorporation crisis, see: Luna and Filgueira, 2009; for the political dynamics of the period in Turkey, see: Taşkın, 2008). In fact, under these conditions, in the 2002 elections, another new populist party (the nationalist-populist Youth Party) entered the political scene and received over 7% of the votes. Therefore, the conditions that both supply and demand side explanations emphasize were present in Turkey. These conditions allowed the rise of a strong populist party/movement that would mobilize the grievances

of large sectors within the society, by naming and dignifying them as the authentic people and responding to the representation crisis by offering to carry them to power.

While conditions were suitable for the rise of a strong conservative populism, conditions for the reproduction of populism-in-power were also present. A theoretical debate on populism's locus within democracies (a literature related to the empirical studies on the emergence of populism), provides avenues to make sense of the reproduction of AKP's populism-in-power and the party's ability to shape Turkish politics according to its authoritarian populist vision of democracy. Within the discussion on the locus of populism within democracies, there are accounts that view populism's emergence as pathological or as reflective of the poor health of representative government (Urbinati, 1998; Taggart, 2002). Alternatively, populism is also situated within the internal contradictions of liberal constitutional democracy, tensions between its liberal and democratic, or constitutional and democratic elements (Mouffe, 2000; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012). Finally, there are also studies that maintain that populism is situated within the tensions of modern democracy's ideal and its reality (Meny and Surel, 2002; also see: Canovan 1999).

Studies that emphasize tensions between the idea and reality of modern democracies broadly overlap with the framework I employ in this paper. These studies emphasize the constitutive tension between democracy's "ideology (the power of the people) and its functioning (the power of the elites chosen by the people)" (Meny and Surel, 2002, p. 8). In my framework, I express this paradox found at the core of modern democracies as follows: the source of legitimacy for modern democracy is the idea of popular rule, but in reality, modern democracy is practiced through political institutions and mechanisms (like elections) that grant a large amount of autonomy to rulers. Therefore, in all modern democratic countries, there is always space for populists to emerge by claiming that the country's democracy does not reflect popular will in power, but that it should (Sözen, 2019, pp. 279-280). However, when in power, populists' ability to reframe political institutions in accordance with their authoritarian vision of democracy gets enhanced if the political regime in that context diverges from basic modern democratic features (or if instead of consolidated modern democracies, they are defective democracies or hybrid regimes). In Turkey, as I briefly demonstrate, at the time of the AKP's emergence in the early 2000s, not only were major conditions of emergence of populism present, but the country's political regime was a defective democracy, which made it easier for the AKP to reframe political institutions to exalt the position of the elected rulers and make them unaccountable by the citizens. Below, I briefly describe that process of autocratization by executive aggrandizement.

From Tutelary Democracy to Competitive Authoritarianism

When the AKP came to power in 2002, in terms of the organization of power, the 1982 constitution was more or less intact. By the end of its second term in 2011, the party had managed

to turn this framework into one that fit competitive authoritarianism, without a complete overhaul (with the notable exception of the transformation of the judicial branch with the 2010 referendum)[3].

The 1982 constitutional framework was different than the 1924 framework that was in place when the DP came to power. This constitution, under which the AKP took power, had two basic features concerning the organization of power. First, the executive branch was strongly defined and difficult to hold accountable; second, the military had an enhanced position as well as autonomy within the system (Özbudun, 2000, pp. 105-123; Parla, 2007, pp. 86-97). Also, in terms of vertical division of powers, Turkey was clearly defined as a highly centralized unitary state (Uygun, 2007), depriving the citizens of any scope afforded by separate sources of power at national and sub-national levels of government and thereby of ruling groups checking each other. Even more significantly, in terms of horizontal divisions of power, under the 1982 constitution, Turkey remained a parliamentary system with an unusually strong presidency (Heper and Çınar, 1996). Particularly relevant to checks and balances were the presidency's appointment powers to the high courts, such as the highest administrative court of the country (the Council of State) and the Constitutional Court. The president's parliamentary election required only a majority of the full membership of the parliament, which meant that any single party majority at the time of the presidential election would guarantee its candidate's election. As such, any party that has a parliamentary majority at the time of presidential elections, would have not only the control of the executive and legislative branches, as in all parliamentary democratic systems, but would also be able to slowly extend its powers vis-à-vis the judiciary – and the AKP managed to get its candidate elected in 2007. Finally, in addition to the concentration of power at the centre and weak limits on that power, Turkish parties, and particularly the AKP, have been leadership dominated, and hierarchically organised (Ayan, 2010). As a result, power was not divided at that level either.

In short, by 2007, when the AKP started its second term, it already had very extensive powers as well as prospects for further extension of those powers as it stayed in government and controlled the presidency - powers that would be hard to accumulate in a democratic regime with checks and balances. The critical challenge in front of the AKP's full control was the military's enhanced position in Turkish politics, the most significant feature of Turkey's tutelary democracy at the time. In fact, Parla argues that the 1982 constitution stipulates a "triple executive branch", because the military bureaucracy was added to the dual executive of the parliamentary systems – the president and the cabinet (2007, pp. 86-97). Therefore, this was indeed an anti-democratic challenge, and fighting against that challenge and further concentrating power in its own hands in the process, buttressed the appeal of the AKP's populist authoritarian vision of democracy. In power politics terms, the military's slow retreat from politics had already started in the late 1990s, corollary with the EU accession reforms at the time (Heper, 2005). Moreover, after 2007, the military's veto power was progressively delegitimized through a series of highly politicized (and procedurally problematic) large-scale trials

(primarily the *Ergenekon* and *Sledgehammer* trials) of purported coup plotters and others allegedly involved in illegal activities that imprisoned scores of the higher echelons of the military (Gürsoy, 2015). These developments left the AKP free of the veto power and guardianship of the military and made the already strongly defined executive branch even more dominant.

Finally, in this framework with an already aggrandized executive, the concentration of power further increased with the 2010 constitutional referendum that significantly redesigned the judiciary. This referendum (approved by 58%) increased the power of the executive over the judiciary via a number of appointments allotted to the executive branch (or to the institutions heavily influenced by it), and the way the executive branch managed to exert influence on critical elections to the judiciary on October 2010 (Kalaycıoğlu, 2012). All of these developments, while being in line with Erdoğan's populist ideal of "making the judiciary the people's [elected rulers] back garden" (2010, İstanbul Meeting), weakened divisions between ruling factions, made elected executives branch preponderant, and citizens weaker.

This process of reconfiguring political institutions in line with the supremacy of the elected officers constitutes the first way that a populist authoritarian conception of democracy relates to regime outcomes. However, as outlined above, there is a second mechanism that connects populism-in-power to autocratization, one that runs through populist leadership: Populist democracy not only interprets external checks over elected officials as being against democracy, but also views internal checks (self-restraint) of the leadership (conceived as embodiments of the popular will) as immoral and anti-democratic.

In line with this logic, at every opportunity, the AKP leadership has used its existing powers to further concentrate power in its own hands and to restrict oppositional liberties. For example, in 2009, the Ministry of Finance sent tax inspectors to the then biggest media group (Doğan media, a media group that was not controlled by the government), penalizing it with a record $2.5 billion tax fine (FT, 2009), leading the group to progressively sell its assets (especially after the 2010 referendum, which made it very hard to challenge the penalty through the courts). Another illustrative example is the appointment of 41-year old Alparslan Altan as a substitute member to the constitutional Court a few months before the 2010 referendum. He used to be a rapporteur to the Court, and in order to be able to place him on the bench, he was first appointed to the position of vice-undersecretary of maritime affairs for 31 days. This appointment was only devised to make him eligible as a high bureaucrat for a seat in the Court (Radikal, 2010). Also, Constitutional changes shortly after, would make him a regular member, while his pre-referendum appointment to the court would enable him to stay there until he reached the age of 65[4] – although the constitutional changes limited the term of later appointees to 12 years. Though neither of these actions violated existing rules, they nonetheless clearly violated the norms that make a modern democracy survive. However, from the perspective of the populist conception of ideal democracy, these moves freed the popular will from the fetters of elite supervision and were therefore democratic.

Overall, through both of these mechanisms, by the 2011 elections, the Turkish political regime was already shaped in accordance with a populist vision that glorifies competitive authoritarianism as ideal democracy. In turn, in all the ensuing major crises such as the Gezi uprisings, the 17–25 December crisis, and the repeat elections in 2015, the party employed the authoritarian instruments (such as control over the judiciary and media) that it had already accumulated in this period (2007–2011), to deepen the already existing authoritarian features of the regime.

Conclusion

In this paper, my argument about the relationship of populism and democracy is that the populist vision of democracy (reflecting the popular will in power), if implemented within the existing political institutional framework of modern democracies (without any other innovative mechanism of popular will translation), carries the potential to lead to strong rulers and weak citizens and a competitive authoritarian regime.

In Turkey, the AKP came to power when the conditions were suitable for the rise of a strong conservative populist movement. Moreover, the existing political institutional framework was conducive to the constitution of a populist authoritarian regime, because the system was prone to the concentration of power, and the most significant checks on this power were extra-democratic. In tandem, these features provided opportunities for the conservative AKP to autocratize the Turkish political regime, while presenting its populist authoritarian vision as democratic and securing non-conservative allies (like liberal intellectuals).

Finally, the AKP's populism is built on a strong tradition of right-wing populism in Turkey, that first came to power in 1950 with the DP's rule. This tradition has a clear vision of democracy: reflecting national will in power via elections. This conception is sometimes called a majoritarian approach to democracy (Sayarı, 2002, p. 78; Özbudun, 2014). However, majorities do not naturally exist in the society. If the term refers to electoral majorities, it is important to remember that elections are statistical apparatuses that aggregate votes cast for the same party for different reasons at a particular point in history. Turkish right-wing populists from the DP to the AKP single out these statistical apparatuses (elections) as the singular democratic mechanism, by claiming that it reveals the popular will. However, this vision of democracy, on the one hand delegitimizes institutions and mechanisms of modern democracy that would weaken the rulers and strengthen citizens (like checks and balances and oppositional liberties); on the other hand, it fails to replace them with any alternative mechanisms of democratic empowerment (e.g. innovative participatory mechanisms or measures like specific mandates). Therefore, their ideal political regime conception is best described as populist competitive authoritarianism, and not as majoritarian democracy.

1   It is possible to conjecture two reasons for this exclusion: first, until recently the use of the concept of populism-in-power was more or less confined to Latin American studies; second, the DP's conception of the people was different than the 'working class' or 'working people' populisms of its paradigmatic contemporaries in the second wave, and closer to the agrarian populisms of the first wave of late 19th century.

2   The conceptual relationship I build in this article between populism and an authoritarian conception of competitive elections fits well with both 'electoral authoritarianism' (Schedler, 2006) and 'competitive authoritarianism' (Levitsky, and Way, 2002) concepts. For simplicity, for the rest of the article I use the term 'competitive authoritarianism'.

3   There were two other significant changes: the initiation of the popular election of the president with the 2007 referendum, which was implemented for the first time in 2014; and the transition to a hyper-presidential system in 2017. However, since this section is on the formation of the competitive authoritarian regime framework by 2011, and these changes came after that (2014, and 2017). As a result, I did not include them to the list.

4   Alparslan Altan could not complete his term, as he was removed from his position after the July 2016 coup attempt.

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