

“Durmak yok, yola devam”¹ A Close Look at AKP’s Election Success

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Abstract

This article analyzes the political practices of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), which was formed as a result of a split in the pro-Islamist National Outlook Movement by investigating its major victory in the July 2007 elections. Through a close analysis of events that led to early elections and the election campaign led by AKP, I show in this paper that the party success is based on three important factors. First, the strong party apparatus led by the charismatic leader Erdoğan was prepared well for the elections, using both interpersonal and mass communication techniques, and thus developed an affective bond with the electorate. Second, the party had focused on solving peoples’ everyday problems through clientalist networks throughout its four year rule and continued these activities throughout the campaign period and thus motivated the people to work and vote for the party. Third, the party framed its failures in policy, the increasing political polarization and crisis that emerged preceding the elections, as the responsibility of the statist forces that were working against the people and presented AKP as the only option for the electorate that wanted continued economic and political stability and development.

1. Introduction

Parliamentary elections were held in Turkey on July 22, 2007. The ruling AKP came out as the strongest by gaining 46.6% of the votes. The only opposition party that was represented in the Turkish National Grand Assembly, the secularist, center-left Republican People’s Party (CHP)² garnered 20.8%. The Nationalist Action Party (MHP) that had suffered a big defeat in the 2002 elections was able to increase its support to 14.2%. Out of the fourteen political parties that participated in the elections, none other than these three were able to pass the 10% national threshold required to send representatives to Parliament. However, Democratic People’s Party (DTP) candidates had run as independents to circumvent the threshold which had prevented them from entering Parliament in previous elections despite winning majority of votes in Southeastern provinces of Turkey representing the Kurdish people. This strategy

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paid off and twenty DTP candidates were able to win, who then proceeded to form their party group after the elections. Another party that got representation in Parliament was the Democratic Left Party (DSP) whose members ran on the CHP lists as a result of the efforts of uniting the left. However, this was a short-lived union and DSP candidates split soon after the elections from CHP. There were many other independent candidates that were elected to the unicameral Parliament.³

In the months leading up to the elections, the country was plagued with increased polarization between the opposition party CHP, the army and AKP, heightened level of terrorist activities of the outlawed Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), and the failed attempt of electing a new president. It seemed for many in the opposition that while AKP might still gain a high percentage of votes, a second AKP government was highly unlikely to be formed. What, then, explains the success of AKP? What enabled Erdoğan's party to win the elections with an increased degree of support despite the concerted effort for delegitimization of its power in the eyes of the people by the opposition forces? How could AKP endure politically, having moved away from its reformist agenda in the second half of its rule and followed the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) program of neoliberal policies very closely that increased the gap between the rich and poor? Factors listed by the analysts of Turkish politics for AKP victory included economic growth, controversy surrounding the presidential elections, weakness of other parties, and increased tension regarding the Kurdish question and populism in the form of votes for goods.

In the first section, I provide a brief historical background of AKP in order to investigate if any campaign strategies have been carried over by the AKP leaders from their experience in the parties of the National Outlook Movement (Milli Görüş Hareketi) which was the representative of Islamism in Turkey. Then, I discuss developments that led government to bring the elections forward which were originally to be held in November because I believe these events have affected the party campaign strategy. The third section will consist of an examination of the 2007 election campaign. My analysis here is based on data I collected as a participant observer during the last month of campaigning in different locations around Turkey, follow-up interviews with local party officials as well as printed campaign material of the party distributed to the electorate. I participated in party rallies, spent several days with Members of Parliament (MP) candidates and local party officials during home and small shop visits and other canvassing activities.

2. A brief background of AKP

Is AKP Islamist, or conservative democratic? Does the party have a secret agenda for Islamization of society and state or does it have the genuine intention for democratizing Turkey? These questions are debated both in academic circles and the national public arena. An in-depth analysis of AKP and its place on the Turkish political spectrum is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather by focusing on the election campaign strategies, I aim to move away from the dichotomous understanding of AKP. I provide in this section a brief look at developments that led to the emergence of the party on the Turkish political scene.

AKP was founded on August 14, 2001 defining itself as a centrist party, disclaiming any affiliation with the National Outlook Movement. The latter Islamist movement emerged in the 1970's and formed political parties called the National Order Party (MNP), the National Salvation Party (MSP), the Welfare Party (RP), and the Virtue Party (FP), all of which were closed down by the Constitutional Court. However, the leading cadre of AKP had become active politicians in the parties of the National Outlook Movement. The party leader Erdoğan started his political career at MSP as the president of the youth branch of Beyoğlu district in Istanbul in the 1970's. Some of the other leading figures as well as many rank and file members have come from this movement.

The main predecessor of AKP, RP, was established in 1983 as successor to the two parties founded before the 1980 military coup under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan. RP, starting with only 4.4% of the votes in the 1984 local elections, slowly increased its popular support throughout the 1980's. The turning point though was the municipal elections of March 24, 1994 when the party won 28 of 76 provinces and six of 15 largest cities including Istanbul and Ankara with 19% of the votes.⁴ Then, in the December 1995 parliamentary elections, RP gained 21% of the votes winning the largest number of seats in Parliament. There were many reasons for this success. RP had a very strong grassroots organization with "a personalized political style that mobilized "cells" of neighbors"⁵ working day and night to meet every potential voter, ringing every doorbell in the neighborhood, providing transport to the polls, waiting until the morning for the vote count by the ballot box.⁶ The party appealed to non-religious voters by running campaigns designed by a professional marketing agency, avoiding religious themes and images in advertisements and presenting itself as a forward looking party open to people from all walks of life.⁷ Municipalities around the country controlled by RP worked as well distributing coal, clothing, soup and food to the needy.⁸ This experience of local power has been a key factor for the party to connect with the people, to extend its base from a small group of followers to the popular sectors especially living in shantytowns around metropolitan cities.

Despite gaining a majority of seats in Parliament, center-right parties attempted to block RP from government. After the failure of these efforts, the leader of one, True Path Party (DYP) Tansu Çiller formed a coalition government with RP in 1996 which lasted until the forced resignation of Prime Minister Erbakan in June 1997. Starting with a meeting of the National Security Council on February 28, 1997, a period of crack down on Islamic elements of the society started and subsequently the Constitutional Court closed down RP in January 1998. FP was the successor to RP which adopted a pro-European Union (EU), pro-human rights discourse.⁹ The split within the National Outlook Movement between reformers and conservatives grew within the FP. The reformers favored a moderate political style, pragmatism, compromise and accommodation with the system.¹⁰ Following the decision of the Constitutional Court to close down FP, the moderates founded AKP in August 2001 and the conservative faction founded the Felicity Party (SP) in July 2001.¹¹

AKP tried to differentiate itself from its predecessors by claiming that it is not an ideological party and moved away from the anti-Western, anti-Europe and Islamic rhetoric of RP.

Embracing the post-Cold War neoliberal world order, that proclaims that the era of ideologies is over and focuses instead on “effective governance”¹², AKP claimed that it is open to people from every ideological background. Local party leaders and mayors I talked to emphasized this point over and over again and explained the party’s main identity as a “party of services” (hizmet partisi).

In the November 2002 general elections, AKP won a majority of seats in Parliament by gaining 34% of the votes. The only other party that was able to have representatives in Parliament was the CHP with 19% of the votes. All other parties had failed to pass the 10% national threshold.

In the initial years of its rule, the party managed to squeeze in successes in reforming the economy and democratization as well as in the EU accession path. The Gross National Product (GNP) increased fourfold, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita doubled reaching \$5500. Inflation went down to single digits. Coming to power right after one of the biggest financial crisis in the history of the Republic in 2002, AKP followed the program drawn by the IMF, which was already put into effect under the previous government. Erdoğan’s government passed a series of democratic reforms in order to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria. Removing the ban on Kurdish broadcasting, and changing the composition of the National Security Council in order to limit the military’s role in politics were among these reforms.¹³ AKP was able to increase its level of support in the 2004 municipal elections to 41%, an important fact to bear in mind in analyzing the latest elections.

However, after acquiring a date for starting accession talks at the end of 2004, AKP faltered on its reform path. The EU suspended accession talks partially in 2006 after the failure of opening Turkish ports and airports to vessels from Cyprus. The government did not make a concrete move to amend the infamous Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code, which criminalizes those who “insult Turkishness.”¹⁴ It has been argued that AKP has seen democratization with the help of the EU only instrumentally, as a bulwark against the secular establishment that had started a campaign against Islamic forces with the 28th of February process. As a result, when the level of pressure from military and civilian opposition increased, it has moved away from reformism and focused its energy on remaining in power and reaping its benefits.

3. The road to elections

Elections were originally scheduled to take place in November 2007. However, the inability of Parliament to elect a president to replace strict secularist Ahmet Necdet Sezer, whose seven year tenure was going to end in May, resulted in the election date to be moved to July 22. From the early months of 2007, the presidential elections were expected to turn into a crisis as Prime Minister Erdoğan refrained from declaring his party’s candidate. By withholding this information, Erdoğan contributed to the escalation of the crisis. Predictions that Erdoğan himself would run led the opposition forces to organize demonstrations against such a move. The main organization behind many rallies was the Atatürkist Thought Association (ADD), which was supported by other non-governmental organizations and CHP. Demonstrators

feared that Erdoğan's presidency would lead Turkey away from secularism, one of the founding principles of the Republic that was a source of conflict between the military and the Islamic political parties. Furthermore, organizers argued that AKP government's policies in the last four years had put the existence of the Republican regime under threat. Fear of threat to secular lifestyle was coupled with fear of dissolution of the country along ethnic lines with the aid of the EU and the United States of America (USA). When Erdoğan announced AKP's candidate to the office of the presidency as the foreign minister Abdullah Gül, tension did not wither away and the "Republic demonstrations" continued to be held in major cities around Turkey. Main objections to Gül's candidacy were based on his past statements on secularism and that his wife wore a headscarf. It was argued by some staunch secularists that Mrs. Gül's presence in the presidential residence would be a violation of the ban on wearing headscarves in public places. The opposition party CHP boycotted the first round of elections in Parliament and applied to the Constitutional Court which subsequently decided that the requirement for the quorum of 367 MPs was not met.¹⁵ In the meantime, a statement was posted on the Turkish General Staff webpage (dubbed in the national media as an e-memorandum) on the night of the first round of the presidential elections in Parliament. Building on earlier statements by the commander of the Turkish Armed Forces, Yaşar Büyükanıt, the military listed actions that they deemed to be against the principle of secularism especially in the area of education. The memorandum reiterated that the Turkish Armed Forces considered itself as a party to the discussions about the presidential elections and as a firm supporter of secularism.¹⁶

Without the opposition parties attending the subsequent sessions, AKP could not get Gül elected and called for early elections on July 22. To overcome the stalemate, the government proposed a constitutional amendment package which included the election of the president by a popular vote. With the support of the Motherland Party (ANAP) the package passed, but was vetoed by the president. Ultimately, the bill was taken to the Constitutional Court for its annulment by CHP and the president. The Court finally ruled in favor of the government. A referendum was held in October 2007 which resulted in an overwhelming majority ruling in favor of the amendment.

Another issue that emerged before the elections that had an impact on the campaign and its results was the rise in the level of PKK terrorist activities. In May, there was a bombing at a shopping center in Ankara, and an attack on a freight train in Bingöl.¹⁷ The government stance against a cross-border military action was criticized by nationalists. Funerals of soldiers and terrorist victims were turned into anti-government rallies. As a result of these developments, an important issue for the campaign was security and national identity.

4. The Election Campaign

The campaign period was short due to the moving of the election date, but highly dynamic. AKP ran a tight campaign with a few rallies almost everyday, a busy schedule of local activities and high visibility on the streets and in the media. The following analysis is based on my observations during June and July 2007 as I followed AKP's campaign activities.

I participated in meetings of AKP members with the electorate in a variety of settings in the Southeast, Central Anatolian, and Mediterranean regions as well as in Istanbul and the capital, Ankara. Meetings included party rallies, house and small business visits, party convoys traveling through the streets of a neighborhood, and meetings with neighborhood associations. I interviewed province and district leaders and had informal conversations with many party activists during and after the campaign. I draw attention here to the various types of communication tools used by AKP to convey its message to the voters and mobilization strategies to get people to the polls on election day.

4.1 Party organization's preparations for the elections

"To reach every citizen one-by-one and explain the achievements of the party and the negative political actions of the opposition"¹⁸ was one of the goals of the party during the campaign. In an interview for the party's monthly magazine "Turkey Bulletin", Necati Çetinkaya, president of electoral affairs of AKP, explained how the party prepared for the elections. He mentioned that the main strategy was organizing at the level of the ballot box.¹⁹ The goal was to have three observers each for the central party organization, women and youth branches for every ballot box chosen from among its list of voters. These observers were to perform specific duties before, during and after the elections which were clearly written in the AKP's "Elections Guide".²⁰ This guide included thorough information on election laws as well as detailed description on how propaganda activities could be conducted. In his interview, Çetinkaya said they started working for the elections one and a half years ago reaching a total number of 1.600.000 observers which were trained by the party and given instructions by province and district organizations to be closely followed. Before the elections, observers were to visit potential voters frequently, helping them in any way they could. Women observers were to be in constant close contact with women voters and listen to their problems.

The youth leader of a province explained to me that each observer, mostly young, was responsible for reaching out to three people, starting with very close friends and relatives, and those three were expected to repeat the same process forming a chain of supporters. Ensuring that all election cards reached the voters, elderly voters got to the polls as well as first-time 18-year-old voters knew what to do was also part of their responsibilities. On election day, those that were officially assigned were to monitor the voting and counting process. Çetinkaya stressed the role of the party organization in getting the vote out and said the work of everybody, from the province presidents to the ballot box observers, would bring them victory.

Another source of strength in conducting campaign activities for AKP was the formation of Election Coordination Centers (SKM) at the party headquarters and in 81 provinces. SKM cadres first worked to update information on voter lists, crucial information for propaganda purposes as was previously mentioned. Then, they worked on determining MP candidate lists.²¹ After the conclusion of that process until election day, they were in charge of coordinating campaign activities in each province.²² The main party organization, women

and youth branches as well as MP candidates were put under organizational command of SKMs that prepared weekly and daily schedules to ensure smooth functioning of the campaign. This structure was constructed to enable the party to reach every village, town and neighborhood proficiently in accordance with the party goal of reaching every voter personally. Canvassing groups included a MP candidate, a member each from province and district administrative councils, a mayor, a member of the municipal council, and a member of the youth branch.

MP candidates, especially those running for the first time were dependent on local party organizations during the campaign that already had established contacts with people in their district, neighborhood or village and possessed valuable knowledge regarding their problems, needs and desires. Maintaining good relations between MP candidates and party activists was crucial for success. For this reason, how to reconcile local party organizations' wishes and concerns with the direction the headquarters wanted to take the party was a major concern. Party leaders in their efforts to move to the center of the political spectrum placed names on the MP lists that did not come from party ranks including those that were social democrats.²³ The national media referred to this move by AKP as renewing the party showcase (vitrin in Turkish) and approached it very skeptically. How influential these individuals could be for shaping policies of the party was questioned by influential writers.²⁴ Knowing that dissident voices in the party are rarely heard in public, it seemed hard to expect these newcomers to take the party towards a more democratic direction.

The leadership needed to convince most importantly local party organizations that the newcomers are for the best interest of the party because they relied on their work and the networks they had established to get out the vote. At a meeting with the provincial heads of women and youth branches, Erdoğan stressed the need to be open-minded about the changes. In the absence of democratic mechanisms to determine the party's candidates, MP lists had resulted in complaints from the local party organizations. In his speech, Erdoğan gave a detailed breakdown of the process taken by the party leadership for drawing up the party lists. Drawing attention to the democratic methods adopted only by his party, Erdoğan praised what comes in the Turkish context closest to the primaries held in the USA, where members of the party were asked to choose from a list of those that applied for candidacy.²⁵ However, how seriously this was carried out was questionable. Certainly, it was presented to the party organization by the leadership as if their opinions counted. At the event in Istanbul though, I observed that party delegates were aware of the fact that their vote did not count as much as they would like.

Erdoğan continued his explanation of the process and said that having worked at every level of party organizations since the beginning of his political career, he could speak from experience that local organizations would object outsider candidates. So that was why the party did not rely exclusively on the results of the roll call. While if they had done so, the leadership could not have brought in the moderate names into the party, this also reflected the party's position on internal democracy. One of the criticisms of the AKP leaders when they were breaking away from the RP was the lack of internal democracy in the party.

While initially, AKP seemed to portray an image of an internally democratic party, in 2003 the party's Board of Founders annulled elections to the Central Committee.²⁶ While the party leaders at the provincial level I talked to liked to state that they came to occupy their position through elections, alternative voices to Erdoğan were not heard and in the case of MP candidate selection, the process was far from democratic. Erdoğan explained that commissions were set up in every province that conducted interviews and that final decisions were given based on all these indicators plus taking into consideration Turkey's special social structure. For example, in the Southeast, where tribal affiliations are still a guiding force for how people vote, AKP acted pragmatically and sought support of key families by placing their leaders on the MP lists. One exception to the pragmatic outlook of the party could be the proliferation of women candidates on the lists. Especially in conservative provinces, having a woman on the list could have made the party base uncomfortable at the very least. This negative response was overcome by trust in Erdoğan's vision. On the other hand, by this action, the party was trying to appeal to moderate voters and strengthen its image as a progressive party.

The relationship between the party organization and the people was considered very important for the party's continued success. During the campaign, the heart of politics pumped in the party offices and doors were open to anyone. However, party leaders stressed that the organization needs to be accessible to everyone, not only during election time, and the party members wanted me to observe their interaction with the people to show that they take everybody's concerns seriously, and try to act as a bridge between municipalities and government offices in their area and the people. Written notes are taken at every encounter with someone who is in need of help. To be a problem solver, to be together with the people during important days (e.g. marriages, funerals, births); in short, to keep ties with the nation, is what the organization of the party strived to do. In this manner, AKP kept its clientelist network alive and could claim that the party was always "with the people" and not just during election time. AKP presented a picture of a good patron. From the point of the clients, the party organization is an asset to use against the unresponsive bureaucratic machine and to get their job done. Through developing personal relationships with local party leaders, popular sectors living in an unrepresentative political system aim to oblige politicians to serve the people in return for their votes.²⁷ I could observe this in my visits to party offices after the elections which were buzzing with people that came to ask for help for solving a personal or family problem and as one provincial leader told me their job load has not diminished after July 22 as they now try to carry out the promises they have or have not made to the electorate.

"The party organization is the spine of the party" is a repeated sentence by the party leaders which played a key role in winning the elections. In addition, I was frequently told in my interviews after the elections that success would not be possible without the thousands of volunteers that contributed to the campaign effort. Therefore, keeping the party activists motivated to work during the campaign was vital. Certain activities carried out served just that purpose, for example, putting up banners of the party on the streets. As one MP

candidate put it, “seeing flags of the party is not going to affect a voter’s decision, but it certainly keeps the party youth motivated that have to work hard.” Of course, young volunteers that develop camaraderie with the party organization while working for the campaign expected to benefit from this relationship, mostly in the form of job placements.

4.2 Local mobilization

Highly motivated members of the party organization and troops of volunteers carried out the campaign at the local level. Stress was given to interpersonal communication. The mobilization strategies of meeting face-to-face and one-on-one with supporters seemed to have been carried over from the RP experience to AKP. Just as a social scientist conducting field work, party members referred to their activities as being in the “field”. In this sense, it can be said that the party was using qualitative research methods to understand voters’ concerns, needs and values and was following the maxim that campaign strategies need to be voter-based.

Having active party representatives even at the street level passing on local information up the party organizational chain provided AKP with effective means to cater to the voters. There are two reasons why this organizational structure and communication strategy worked for AKP’s advantage. First, the party members I talked to stressed the fact that even though mass communication has become widely accessible, voters still expect direct contact with politicians. One district leader told me a story about a supporter of the party that was upset because they had skipped this individual’s shop to visit another to convince a voter that was not yet won over. This incident almost cost them a vote he said and explained that people like to receive personal attention especially during election time. AKP organization worked during the elections with this assumption in mind. In my interviews, party activists were very keen on calling my attention to the fact that there was no door left that was not knocked and that no other party worked in this manner. Personalist political style adopted by the party fitted well with the cultural norms of the people. It worked to keep the patron/client relationship alive as I mentioned previously.

Furthermore, provincial leaders I talked to stressed that their election campaign activities were a condensed version of their regular activities. The main party organization, women’s and youth branches all have busy schedules for the winter and during the summers when Parliament is not in session, all AKP parliamentarians visit their districts with the local cadres. Revisiting the same locations couple of months after the elections, I saw party members working as they did during the campaign visiting neighborhoods, holding party meetings, distributing clothes and food for the needy. AKP seemed to be in a constant campaign mode, or, in the words of the party discourse, “close to the people”. This is a typical characteristic of populist parties.

Second and more importantly, local knowledge is crucial for the party because the interactions I observed between party campaigners and the electorate led me to conclude that the voters were concerned mostly about solving problems of their daily lives. In different gatherings where AKP was campaigning, MP candidates usually started by making

a short speech introducing him or herself and listing the main achievements of the party with a particular focus on how AKP policies affected the citizens' economic well-being. For example, talking to a group of women voters, a woman MP candidate said she "shared" her constituents concerns about kitchen expenditures and explained how AKP's policies of bringing down inflation kept prices at the supermarket more or less the same for the last four and a half years.

In the follow-up questions at these meetings however, there was rarely a discussion of national public policy issues such as education or social security. Party groups that were conducting visits were faced with questions regarding local problems. Almost always including an individual from the municipality, a lot of the times the mayor of the district, they were well prepared for the questions. Women's branch activities paralleled the main party organization and wives of mayors and MPs were very active in addition to party activists. The electorate used these part visits as forums for voicing their immediate problems to a local authority directly. For example, in a district of Istanbul where I participated in campaigning activities, the most important problem of the people was not having ownership of the houses they live in. An MP candidate's neighborhood association visit turned into a discussion about this very issue. In another province in central Anatolia, a similar scenario ensued. The MP candidate's meeting with women of a district resulted in a conversation about getting natural gas service in a certain neighborhood. For the least privileged elements of society that are used to seeing politicians only during election times, these face-to-face encounters were a great opportunity for representing themselves.

Interaction between party activists and people I observed was very different depending on the locale. At a hospital visit in central Anatolia, I witnessed very emotional moments where people showed their love for the visitors from the party. Old ladies sent their prayers to "their beloved sons", referring to Prime Minister and leader of AKP Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül and the party members' language had a religious tinge. There was a connection between these leaders and people in this community far exceeding a political or even populist one. Whereas at a village coffeehouse on the Mediterranean coast, there was a cold welcome for the MP candidate and the people showed their disrespect by not standing up to greet him and continuing to play their card game. The conversations between party visitors and community focused on where the government failed, such as agricultural policies.

One of the criticisms of the party was that AKP did not do enough to ease the worries of the urban secular elites and did not put enough energy into reaching out to them. With all the emphasis on reaching the public, why did the party fail in this regard? I was told by party members in a district of Istanbul and a CHP stronghold district elsewhere that they were not able to campaign in the gated communities where the well-to-do live. They complained that they were not allowed to enter these complexes surrounding their district and subsequently no vote for the party went to AKP from these neighborhoods. After the elections the party organization complained that these people were not appreciative of services provided to them especially by the municipality. Having a different educational and cultural background,

the party's strategy to reach the less privileged classes did not work in these neighborhoods. Paving roads going to the gated communities might have made these people's lives a little easier, but was not enough to appeal the upper classes. The party failed to develop ways to communicate with them.

There were several instances I witnessed that indicated that the fight for votes at the local level was very fierce and struggle was carried out street by street. In a neighborhood in Istanbul where DTP supporters resided, stones were thrown at an AKP minibus. The party members were complaining about the fact that they were being held back from visiting a street where CHP had its local election office at the corner. At another province I visited, AKP flags were torn down by an opposition party and replaced with their own. A youth leader told me that their cadres had to stay up all night guarding their SKM office.

Another aspect of the local struggle for votes was the controversy that AKP's distribution of coal, food and money to the poor had proliferated during election time. The media interpreted these activities as "buying votes" and argued that since AKP came to power, these services provided by the Islamic foundations previously now moved to the national public policy level, such as the provision of textbooks by the state for free to every student at the elementary and secondary school level regardless of economic status. However, this interpretation was an oversimplification of this issue. Municipalities, the party organization and Islamic foundations have been "reaching out to the poor" since the mid-1990's. This is another practice that was carried over from RP experience to AKP and should be analyzed within a broader framework of the neoliberal economic and social policies of the party.

After coming to power in 2002, AKP continued implementing the IMF's economic package. The party worked to cut public spending, privatize public enterprises and control wages. Despite great economic growth, neoliberal policies of AKP also increased the income gap between the richest and poorest sectors of society, real wages went down, unemployment rates have not dwindled, and the agricultural sector has suffered. Under these circumstances, how could AKP get votes of the least privileged of society when populism's tools used under an expanding state sector no longer were available for the party? AKP resolved this issue through its social policies that are not based on social democratic principles, but through the need-based help provided by municipalities, the party organization and private charities. The party machine that organized down to the street level was a bridge between those in need and charitable donors. In addition, through reforms in the health and education systems such as improving access to basic health care and giving out money for the poor to send their children to school, the party seemed to be the best option for the least privileged sectors of society. AKP was successful in pursuing neo-populism. While increasing inequality with the neoliberal policies it pursued, by focusing on relieving daily problems of the least privileged in society, the party could gather their support.²⁸ How AKP was able get the trust of the people was that their popular strategies of clientalism were not only squeezed to a short period before the elections, but had continued throughout the four years they were in power.

As the election date was approaching, rhetoric of all the political party leaders was becoming more confrontational and hostile. In contrast, the work of the local organizations continued as before with house visits, small business visits, neighborhood association visits until the very last day before the elections.

4.3 Party rallies

Compared to the tedious campaign work of the members of the party organization at the local level, rallies where Prime Minister Erdoğan, then foreign minister Gül and other ministers participated were covered extensively by the national media. Therefore, the message given at these gatherings served multiple communication purposes, addressing locals as well as the nation at large. In addition; in the absence of formal debates, the only avenue for the leaders to send messages to each other seemed to be the podium at different provinces around the country through the media coverage. More importantly, rallies were a great way for AKP to show the public as well as other parties that it will come out as the strongest party. They were a show of the party's wealth and mobilization capabilities. "The rallies also served the purpose of reinforcing feelings of solidarity and evoked feelings of personal connection with the leader. Through shouting slogans, singing songs, listening to passionate speeches, politics becomes both oral and aural".²⁹

AKP always claimed to be "Turkey's party" and this was a constant theme of the campaign. The party held rallies in 53 of the 81 cities in the country. Compared to CHP and MHP this was a huge number. The party leaders I talked to stressed the fact that while AKP scheduled two or three rallies a day in adjacent cities, the opposition parties held regional rallies. In his speeches at these rallies Erdoğan reiterated that the leaders of CHP and MHP have not visited many provinces in the country and especially criticized them for not traveling to the East of Ankara. He said that his government came to erase regional differences. This has struck a good cord with the popular classes in Central Anatolia, the Black Sea region and the East which have always felt left out by the center politically, economically and socially. To stress that he and his party care for all of Turkey and listen to people's voices from every corner of the country, he did not fail to mention at each rally how many times he visited that province since he became Prime Minister. Furthermore, he told the crowds that these visits were not for opening of just one factory or one new school as the previous governments used to do, but many schools, housing and business complexes collectively. At every province, he spoke not only of the national achievements in the economy, education and health services, but gave detailed information on the specific services brought by his government to that location and promised a university, a new hospital or an airport.

Another hot topic of the rallies was national identity. During the two months leading up to the elections, terrorist activities of the PKK had increased and opposition parties along with military leaders were calling on the government to give permission to the

Turkish Armed Forces for a cross-border raid into Iraq. Both CHP and MHP were very harsh in their attacks on AKP which resisted these calls for military action during the campaign period. Especially pushed on the issue of nationalism by the opposition parties, Erdoğan did not fail to explain AKP's definition in his rally speeches. One of the major campaign slogans was "One country, one nation, one flag, one state", which encapsulated the party's ideals on this issue. He also reiterated the point that his party is against ethnic, regional and religious nationalism. In central Anatolian provinces, he tried to counter the pan-Turkist ideology by mentioning how his party is protecting Turkish heritage by building a highway between the nearest city and the Orhun tablets and visiting Turkic republics. In the Southeast, the party was able to gather huge crowds at rallies, holding Turkish flags in support of the "One country, one nation, one flag" slogan which was a great show of strength by the party against DTP candidates running as independents. Erdoğan went further and called voting for these candidates as a waste and said independents could not be of any service to the people.

Another aspect of AKP's view of nationalism is clearly revealed in this statement of Erdoğan: "Those that are not respectful of the nation's values cannot be nationalists. Those that do not invest in the country cannot be patriots." Erdoğan repeated throughout the campaign that his party follows the voice of the nation and "the greatest will is the nation". Talking about "the people" and "national will" is characteristic of populist parties that are conservative nationalists. AKP fitted this picture in its discourse throughout the campaign.

The influence of the e-memorandum on the voters' choice is another issue that will be continually debate about these elections. However, what is undisputable is that AKP chose to use it as a campaign tool. Foreign minister Gül attended many rallies with the Prime Minister and gave speeches on the issue. Erdoğan also reminded people about the events that led to the failure of Gül being elected. Timing of the declaration of the candidate for the presidency was criticized by many in the media; however reaction to Gül's candidacy both from the military and opposition gave AKP a chance to frame the crisis in a manner that was pleasing to its constituents' ears. One of the arguments regarding the e-memorandum was that it contributed to the framing of the elections as a choice between pro-civilian and pro-military rule. This view was reflected in the headlines of some newspapers the day after the elections as the "people's memorandum."³⁰ However, knowing sensitivities of people about the military, AKP chose to attack only CHP. In his speeches, Erdoğan and Gül framed the crisis surrounding the presidential elections as distrust of the opposition CHP in the 'people'. Erdoğan said that MPs, whose main duty was to represent the people, avoided attending the National Assembly to block the vote and were going to the Constitutional Court for support. Concerning the military, top bureaucracy and the public that came out in rallies in April against the party, the Prime Minister argued that AKP sought support of the 'public' and the 'nation.' Erdoğan complained to the people that the party and Gül were "unjustly treated" by those that claimed that they are the defenders of the regime.³¹ Rather than a choice between civilian and military, AKP presented the situation as a struggle between elites, led by CHP that only care about holding on to their power, and AKP that works for

the people. He asked voters to give a good “lesson of democracy” to those that reverted to undemocratic ways just to stop Gül from becoming president. This discourse reflected the limited vision of the party on democratization which meant “little more than the reduction of the power of the state elites.”³² As opposed to the elitist CHP whose leaders and followers prefer to live in their ivory towers and pursue their own interests, Erdoğan claimed that AKP sided and will continue to side with the people. He presented a picture of CHP as a party that is unwilling to work for the people and in fact that tried to sabotage AKP’s efforts. The party successfully used the failed presidential elections to strengthen its identity as the new center right party in the DP-AP-ANAP³³ lineage rather than a successor to Islamist Welfare by adopting and adapting their language. He used DP’s slogan “Enough, the nation speaks” as “Enough, the nation decides”, and Özal’s slogan “To serve the people is to serve God”. Erdoğan presented himself as the carrier of these populist leaders mantle, but also used the words of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founding father of the Turkish Republic, “Sovereignty belongs unconditionally to the people” frequently. By using this phrase, he aimed to legitimize his party’s emphasis on “the people.”

One of the elements that could not be dismissed at rallies that could be observed as the glue that held all of these supporters together was the charisma of the Prime Minister. In the words of women I talked to at a rally in the Southeast, supporters firmly believed that “he knows what’s best for the country.” When questioned about their specific demands, women were silent and submissive to Erdoğan’s will and said they are at the rally in the 40 degree heat to see him and to show that they are behind him. His image as the patron of the ordinary people had not withered away in the last four years that he held national political power.

Charismatic leadership in Weber’s sense is very important for populists and Erdoğan certainly carries that trait. As a strategy to mobilize support and a communication technique to reach out to his constituency, Erdoğan frequently used a “language of love” in the tradition of Sufi Islam in his rallies. He made religious references without being explicit about it. He frequently repeated “We love you very much, we have great love for Turkey, we don’t discriminate between regions.” Also he used the saying “We love the created because of the creator” of Yunus Emre, a Sufi poet.³⁴ When discussing PKK terrorism, he said “to kill one person is to kill all of humanity” referring to the Quran.

Before coming to power, it was easier for Islamist parties to argue that there is schism between the state and the people. As the governing party, this could seem to be harder to make. However, Erdoğan repeated at the rallies that they worked to glorify the human being first. He argued that through AKP’s rule, distance between the state and the people was narrowing and said: “To glorify the state, human beings need to be glorified first.”

If we just focus on the material benefits that especially the poor were able to get through working or voting for the AKP, we would be losing sight of an important aspect of the political communication that is behind AKP’s success: the language used by its leader. Whether this could be categorized as using religion for political ends could be debated, however it is undeniable that through this language, Erdoğan developed an affective bond with the electorate.

4.4 Party advertisements and other propaganda material

The emphasis given by AKP to interpersonal communication with voters did not lead to the omission of using mass media to convey its message and modern public relations techniques used by political parties in the West. To differentiate itself from the opposition parties, AKP utilized mass communication techniques. As incumbent government, the party led an issue-based advertising strategy and the party ads contained information ranging from education, health, economy to transportation.³⁵ Ads, banners and posters of Erdoğan could be seen everywhere around the country, carefully selected with the location in mind. Party brochures handed out to the people focused on the achievements of the last four years. AKP's emphasis on being a "party of services" was reflected in these publications. In addition to booklets that contained detailed information on all of the different policy arenas, there were brochures containing services brought to the people by AKP for each province. For each MP candidate, business cards and other publicity materials were provided by the headquarters which ensured uniform and professional appearance for effective advertising. This also helped to take financial burdens off especially the women candidates.

In addition, AKP is known to work closely with research and consulting companies to gather poll data of all sorts. I was told by a local party activist that had been active in other parties previously that no other party that he had worked for used scientific techniques and employed such a degree of discipline as AKP. He indicated that everything from the party name to the party logo was carefully designed after surveys were conducted around the country.

Especially important for conducting a successful campaign was to figure out how best to appeal to voters. As KONDA Research and Consultancy election research showed the top two factors that determine voter choice in Turkey was economic concerns and corruption.³⁶ A survey of the party propaganda publications seems to suggest that AKP prepared them with the understanding of the people's wishes using scientifically collected poll data in addition to locally collected information by the party cadres. The issue dealt with most thoroughly was the economy and macro-economic indicators, which were at the beginning of the party booklets that covered all of the policy arenas. Details of economic growth, decrease in inflation and interest rates, increase in consumption and GDP per capita were among the first items discussed in these brochures. Comparison was made between the current state of Turkey in the period before AKP came to power in 2002, which of course was a time of great economic, social and political upheaval. In a meeting with the provincial presidents of his party organization Erdoğan stated: "With AKP in government, Turkey transitioned from an era of collapse, when everything was going wrong, to an era of an ascent, when almost everything is going right."³⁷ Turkey was deprived of even the most basic services by the previous power-holders, but after four years of AKP in power, current state of the country is framed to the electorate as bright, positive, hopeful and with many more projects on the way. Reflecting this idea, one of the main party slogans printed on every party propaganda material was "No stopping, keep on going" (Durmak yok, yola devam).

Communicating important messages through billboard advertisements was a commonly used strategy for the party. Metropolitan municipalities under AKP's control especially informed the public with these advertisements on services they provide, ranging from a new road built to a cultural event to be held. During the campaign, billboards were used at nearly every bus stop, which was a great way to gain attention of many people. AKP's message that it is a party of services was reflected on these advertisements. They focused on everyday problems of the people and showed a picture of an individual with a quote indicating that he or she has benefited from a certain AKP policy and solved a specific problem. Themes most frequently seen were improvements in health care, housing, education and economy. For example, one ad featured a young male saying "I am paying my phone bill for the last four and a half years without any price increase."

Overall, AKP spent most of its time listing its achievements and did not provide a vision for the future and just stressed continuation of stability and expansion of services achieved under its rule.³⁸

5. Conclusion

In this paper, my aim was not to establish a direct link between campaigning efforts and AKP's electoral success. Rather it was more limited, mainly to highlight strategies adopted by AKP to get out the vote. AKP's election campaign seemed to suggest that the party was able to read as well as shape needs, desires and ideas of the people successfully and election results showed that it received support from every province in the country. Especially surprising for many was the party's success in the Southeastern region where it was competing with DTP.

I argued that AKP was able to get out the vote by appealing to the voters in personalist political style adopted by the vast party apparatus led by the charismatic leader of the party, Erdoğan. The party strategy focused on building strong interpersonal connections with a discourse of "love of the nation." This was combined with the effective use of mass communication techniques by devising flashy party slogans and advertisements. Through a close look at how the party prepared its party organization for the elections and campaign strategies adopted, I tried to show AKP's effort at representing itself as a party of service to the people without any discrimination, and a party of Turkey that is the true representative of the people.

AKP is hoping to "keep on going", and the party apparatus at large is already given the orders to start preparing for the upcoming local elections scheduled for March 2009. The goal set by the party is to surpass the 46% mark obtained on July 22, 2007. Anything below will be considered a failure according to the party officials.

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Endnotes:

- 1 Popular AKP slogan in the election campaign, meaning 'No stopping, keep on going'.
- 2 CHP represents the secularist, statist sectors of society.
- 3 Independents included the leader of the Great Union Party (BBP) Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu, the leader of the Freedom and Democracy Party (ÖDP), Mehmet Ufuk Uras, the ex-leader of the Motherland Party (ANAP) Mesut Yılmaz, and Kamer Genç.
- 4 Jenny White, *The Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 116.
- 5 White, *The Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics*, 121.
- 6 Metin Heper, "Islam and Democracy in Turkey: Towards a Reconciliation?" *Middle East Journal*, Vol.51, No.1 (Winter 1997), 36.
- 7 White, *The Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics* 120-121.
- 8 Heper, "Islam and Democracy in Turkey: Towards a Reconciliation?", 36.
- 9 Menderes Çınar, "Turkey's Transformation Under the AKP Rule", *The Muslim World*, Vol. 96 (July 2006), 473.
- 10 White, *The Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics*, 118.
- 11 Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 243-250.
- 12 Umit Cizre and Menderes Cınar, "Turkey Between Secularism and Islam: The Justice and Development Party Experience" ISIP (Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale) Working Paper 2007.
- 13 Çınar, "Turkey's Transformation Under the AKP Rule", 470.
- 14 Cihan Tuğal, "Nato's Islamist Hegemony and Americanization in Turkey", *New Left Review*, Vol.44 (March-April 2007).
- 15 Canan Balkır, "The July 2007 Elections in Turkey," *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol.12, No.3, (November 2007), 416.
- 16 "Gece Yarısı Uyarısı" (Midnight Warning), *Hürriyet*, retrieved on Dec. 4, 2007 on the worldwide web: <http://hurasiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/haber.aspx?id=6421338&tarih=2007-04-28>
- 17 Balkır, "The July 2007 Elections in Turkey," 417.
- 18 Erdoğan's speech at the opening of the new AKP Headquarters on June 13, 2007.
- 19 Interview with Necati Çetinkaya, *Türkiye Bülteni*, AK Parti Aylık Yayın Organı (Turkey Bulletin, AK Party Monthly Publication), no.49 (June 2007).
- 20 "AK Parti Seçim Rehberi 2007" (AKP Election Guide) (Ankara: FSP Printing House, 2007)
- 21 The Turkish election system is based on proportional representation with party lists.
- 22 Interview with Mustafa Ataş, Istanbul MP and the president of AKP's Election Coordination Center, *Türkiye Bülteni*, AK Parti Aylık Yayın Organı (Turkey Bulletin, AK Party Monthly Publication), no.51 (June 2007).
- 23 "AKP vitrinine 10 yeni yüz" (10 new names for AKP's showcase), *Radikal*, retrieved on Dec. 3, 2007 on the world wide web: www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=222997
- 24 "AKP vitrinini yeniliyor" (AKP is renewing its showcase), *Milliyet*, retrieved on Dec. 3, 2007 on the world wide web www.milliyet.com.tr/2006/10/29/siyaset/axsiy01.html
- 25 Called by the party as "temayül yoklaması". Measuring who is most liked, respected and trusted to be an MP by the people filling the ranks of the party organization would literally translate as 'inclination roll call'.
- 26 Tuğal, "Nato's Islamist Hegemony and Americanization in Turkey".
- 27 Lucy Taylor, "Client-ship and Citizenship in Latin America", *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, Vol.23, No.2 (2004), pp.213-227.
- 28 Ayşe Buğra and Çağlar Keyder, "Poverty and Social Policy in Turkey", Boğaziçi University Social Policy Forum, January 2005.
- 29 Sian Lazar, "Personalist Politics, Clientalism and Citizenship: Local Elections in El Alto, Bolivia", *Bulletin of Latin*

American Research, Vol.23, No.2 (2004), pp.228-243.

30 "Bu da Halkın Muhtırası" (This is people's memorandum.) Radikal, retrieved on March 28, 2008 on the world wide web: www.radikal.com.tr/index.php?tarih=23/07/2007

31 From speeches of Erdoğan and Gül at parties rallies, which I attended as well as news articles of the rallies on AKP's official webpage: www.akparti.org.tr/haber.asp?kategori=9

32 İler Turan, "Unstable stability: Turkish Politics at the crossroads?", International Affairs, Vol.83, No.2 (2007) p.325.

33 The Democrat Party (DP) founded by Menderes, the Justice Party (AP) by Demirel and the Motherland Party (ANAP) by Özal are the succeeding parties representing the center-right in Turkey.

34 In Turkish "Yaradılanı severiz yaradandan ötürü".

35 Necati Özkan, "22 Temmuz ve Demokrasi Zaferi", Pi Güz, 2007 (03), 26-29.

36 Tarhan Erdem, "Yeni Türkiye'yi Anlamak" Voyvoda Caddesi Toplantıları - Konferans Tam Metni, KONDA Research and Consultancy (2007, İstanbul) retrieved on March 25,2008 on the world wide web www.konda.com.tr/html/dosyalar/yeni_turkiye.pdf

37 Türkiye Bülteni, AK Parti Aylık Yayın Organı (Turkey Bulletin, AK Party Monthly Publication), no.47 (April 2007) 5-6

38 Özkan, "22 Temmuz ve Demokrasi Zaferi", 26-29

List of Abbreviations

ADD	Atatürkçü Düşünce Derneği (Ataturkist Thought Association)
AKP	Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party)
ANAP	Anavatan Partisi (Motherland Party)
AP	Adalet Partisi (Justice Party)
BBP	Büyük Birlik Partisi (Great Union Party)
CHP	Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican People's Party)
DP	Demokrat Parti (Democrat Party)
DSP	Demokratik Sol Partisi (Democratic Left Party)
DTP	Demokratik Toplum Partisi (Democratic People's Party)
DYP	Doğru Yol Partisi (True Path Party)
FP	Fazilet Partisi (Virtue Party)
MHP	Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (Nationalist Action Party)
MNP	Milli Nizam Partisi (National Order Party)
MSP	Milli Selamet Partisi (National Salvation Party)
PKK	Kurdish Labor Party
ÖDP	Özgürlük ve Demokrasi Partisi (Freedom and Democracy Party)
RP	Refah Partisi (Welfare Party)
SP	Saadet Partisi (Felicity Party)
SKM	Seçim Koordinasyon Merkezi (Election Coordination Center)

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