

**Populism of Religious Conservative Parties in Turkey:
A Psychoanalytical Approach**

Türkiye’de Dindar Muhafazakâr Partilerin Popülizmi: Psikanalitik Bir Yaklaşım

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Abstract

Despite the growing number of works attempting to understand and explain the Justice and Development Party's (JDP) populism, we possess limited insight into the *longue durée* of Islamic populism in Turkey and its psycho-political origins. Therefore, this article highlights the lines of continuity and change in the populist strategy of Islamist parties with reference to the discourse of their leaders who managed to present their changing, growing, but partial support base as the totality of the people. Since social, economic, and political crises played a significant role in the rise of these Islamist parties in Turkey, this study relies on Laclau's logic of populism blended with a Lacanian psychoanalysis, underlining the significance of crises in the formulation and articulation of populist demands. This study will thereby offer a new understanding of the rise of Islamist parties that successfully defined, re-defined, and then re-defined "the people" they claim to represent through a populist discourse and strategy in Turkey.

Keywords: *Justice and Development Party, Populism, Political Islam, Turkey.*

Introduction

Religious conservative parties have been present in the multi-party period of Turkish politics since January 1970. Accused of undermining the secular nature of the Republic, these parties were closed down either by military administrations or the Constitutional Court on several occasions. Nevertheless, these parties turned out to be both resilient and successful. They not only managed to rise from the ashes of the previous ones, but also enlarged their electoral support through this process of closing down and re-opening. Rather than focusing on their resilience in the face of

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constant marginalization, this study analyzes the reasons for the continuous electoral success of Islamist parties, as shown in Table 1, from the National Order Party (NOP) in the early 1970s to the Justice and Development Party (JDP) in contemporary Turkey through a populism lens.

Despite the growing number of works attempting to understand and explain JDP's populism,² we possess limited insight into the *longue durée* of Islamic populism and its psycho-political origins. To fill this gap, I first highlight the lines of continuity and change in their populist strategy and thereby link the JDP with its predecessors. I argue that populism has been a significant, successful, and enduring element of Islamist parties from the beginning in the early 1970s, although we associate populism directly with the JDP today. Second, I aim to illustrate the psychoanalytical mechanism behind the populism of these parties and explain how Islamist parties in Turkey presented their changing, growing, and partial support base as the totality of the people. To this end, I rely on Laclau's logic of populism blended with Lacanian psychoanalysis, which underlines the significance of crises in the formulation and articulation of populist demands.³ I hope to provide an alternative *longue durée* explanation for the rise of Islamist parties in Turkey, which constructed "the people" by continuously defining and re-defining who they claim to represent through a populist discourse and strategy.

Table 1. Religious Conservative Parties in General Elections

Election Year	Religious Conservative Parties	Vote (percent)	Seats
-	National Order Party	-	3/450
1973	National Salvation Party	11.8	48/450
1977	National Salvation Party	8.5	24/450
1983	-	-	-
1987	Welfare Party	7.2	-

2 See Şakir Dinçşahin, "A Symptomatic Analysis of the Justice and Development Party's Populism in Turkey, 2007–2010", *Government and Opposition* 47, no. 4 (2012): 618-640; Toygar Sinan Baykan, *The Justice and Development Party in Turkey: Populism, Personalism, Organization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); S. Erdem Aytaç and Ezgi Elçi, "Populism in Turkey", in *Populism Around the World*, ed. Daniel Stockemer (Cham: Springer, 2019), 89-108; Yavuz, M. Hakan and Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, *Islam, Populism and Regime Change in Turkey: Making and Re-making the AKP* (New York: Routledge, 2020); Bill Park, "Populism and Islamism in Turkey", *Turkish Studies* 19, no. 2 (2018): 169-175; Bilge Yabancı "Fuzzy Borders between Populism and Sacralized Politics: Mission, Leader, Community and Performance in 'New' Turkey", *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 21, no.1 (2020): 92-112.

3 Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2007).

1991	Welfare Party	16.9	62/450
1995	Welfare Party	21.4	158/550
1999	Virtue Party	15.4	111/550
2002	Justice and Development Party	34.3	363/550
2002	Felicity Party	2.5	-
2007	Justice and Development Party	46.6	341/550
2011	Justice and Development Party	49.8	327/550
2015 June	Justice and Development Party	40.8	258/550
2015 November	Justice and Development Party	49.5	317/550
2018	Justice and Development Party	42.5	295/600
2023	Justice and Development Party	35.6	268/600

Theory and Method

The literature on populism flourished with the recent rise of electoral support for various populist parties and leaders including Modi in India, Trump in the USA, Brexiteers in the UK, Front National in France, Syriza in Greece, and Alternative für Deutschland in Germany. Despite the growing number of studies on populism, drawing a single definition from these distinct cases has proved impossible. However, it is conceivable to elicit a set of definitional characteristics by examining these different cases, although it is impossible to find a single case that features them all. At a conference devoted to define populism held at the London School of Economics and Political Science in 1967, Isaiah Berlin warned his colleagues not to suffer from a “Cinderella complex” that is, the frustration that comes from not being able to find a case (a foot) that perfectly fits the theory of populism (the shoe) although “...there are all kinds of feet which it nearly fits. The prince is always wandering about with the shoe; and somewhere, we feel sure, there awaits it a limb called pure populism. This is the nucleus of populism, its essence.”⁴ But then, what is the essence of populism? What is common to all populisms everywhere?

Scholars agree that the essence of populism is an appeal to “the people.”⁵ However, this prompts the question of who are “the people.” In various studies of populism, we observe that populist politicians refer to “the people” to denote three groups: the

4 Isaiah Berlin, “To Define Populism”, in *London School of Economics Conference on Populism: Verbatim Report*, (London: LSE Library HN17 C74, 20-21 May 1967), 139.

5 See Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser and et al., “Populism: An Overview of the Concept and the State of the Art”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, eds. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al Paul Taggart, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1-24.

victims of the system, silent majority of the ordinary people, and those claiming to be the natives of a country. ⁶ This implies that the appeal of populism is never to the totality of the people, but to some people. For the populist, only “some people” are the “real people,” and “the real people” represent the whole. ⁷ In this sense, populism is the art of turning some part of society, the *plebs*, into *populus*, the totality of the people. ⁸ This transformation is achieved through the efforts of a political movement wanting to enjoy the support of either the downtrodden or average citizen, or the natives of a national community. ⁹ Rather than the autonomous organizational power of these segments of society, a populist discourse constructs the people or transforms “some” into “the people.” It is constructed in the discourse of party leaders as a political strategy to win the hearts, minds, and votes of the masses.

According to Laclau, who refers to Lacanian psychoanalysis, the populist construction of “the people” has several symptoms: (1) a crisis, (2) common symbols that consolidate a group of people as “the people,” (3) a set of unmet demands of “the people,” and (4) “the others” who are imagined to possess what “the people” lack and demand. ¹⁰ First, the opportunity to launch a populist campaign emerges in times of *crisis* such as civil wars, ethnic conflicts, economic crises, exhaustion of political traditions, the discrediting of political parties, and political corruption. From a psychoanalytical perspective, the impact of the crises on some segments of society is similar to that of an infant who sees itself for the first time in the mirror. The image in the mirror helps the infant imagine being a separate, complete, and whole being. Similarly, in times of crises, one segment of society that previously existed only as “a body in bits and pieces” feels alienated and separated from the rest of society and as a result, becomes an independent “self.” ¹¹

Subsequent to the awakening of “the self,” the infant also realizes there are “others” outside his/her own existence again after the first encounter with the mirror. Among

6 See Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 22.

7 Müller, *What is Populism*, 21.

8 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 93-94.

9 Torcuato S. DiTella, “Populism and Reform in Latin America”, in *Obstacle to Change in Latin America*, ed. Claudio Veliz (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 47.

10 This theoretical framework draws mostly on Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 67-128.

11 Jane Gallop, “Lacan’s ‘Mirror Stage’: Where to Begin”, *SubStance* 12, no.1 (1982), 121.

these others, “the small others” are babies similar to the physical image of the infant, whereas the “big Others” are grown-ups, especially the mother, the figure the infant depends on and looks up to.¹² The mOther (capital O in the middle to indicate her big Otherness) helps the infant imagine his/her “self” as bodily complete and mastered by placing the baby before a mirror and holding it in an upright position. Populist leaders in times of crises act similarly to the mOther in the mirror stage. Appealing to the segments of society affected by crises, leaders tell them who they are and who they should be-come, and thereby, they impose their own desire to “the people.” In other words, the leaders hold a mirror to the groups alienated from the rest of society because of a crisis. As such, the leaders help them imagine themselves as a mastered, fully matured, and complete self. To set up an imaginary unity, populists refer to the common symbols, norms, and values of a class, religion, tradition, or ideology, which help “the people” imagine themselves in perfect shape. This is the moment “the self” is constituted, mediated in the leader’s discourse as a totalizing image, which transforms the group into “the people.”

The constitution of “the self” for the infant or totalization of “the people” with regard to some segment of society is not the end of this process. Again, in psychoanalytical terms, the image in the mirror gives only an “illusion of unity” or “anticipation of mastery” to the infant.¹³ The “self” is indeed an illusion with mirrors. The infant does not yet have the maturation of power, mastery, and completeness. The infant can only imagine this with the help of the mOther in front of a mirror. Similarly, the populist’s target group would first feel jubilant over this sense of unification and organization, being totalized in their leaders’ discourse. However, the jubilation of this illusion of completeness leaves to anxiety when people realize their completeness is only a future anticipation yet to be achieved.¹⁴ They feel they miss something, which they assume would make them complete when reaching it. This becomes the object of their desire and therefore, the motor of their actions. From then, they set off on a life-long journey of seeking this missing thing, namely the *object petit a* in psychoanalysis.¹⁵

The lack of and desire for the *object petit a* is the third symptom of populism, whi-

12 Derek Hook, “Absolute Other: Lacan’s ‘Big Other’ as Adjunct to Critical Social Psychological Analysis?”, *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2, no.1 (2008): 54.

13 Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan* (London: Routledge, 2004), 24-26.

14 Gallop, “Lacan’s Mirror Stage,” 123-124.

15 Homer, *Jacques Lacan*, 87-88.

ch Laclau labels as *unmet demands*. During critical junctures, populist leaders bring together frustrated masses not only with reference to common symbols of religious, traditional ideological perfection, but also to what they lack and desire, namely the unmet demands. These crises make the desire for a common lack eminent and become windows of opportunity for developing a relation of equivalence among unsatisfied demands, common symbols, and thus for populism.¹⁶

Fourth, now that “the people” is defined with reference to “idealized” common symbols of a social group and a set of unmet demands in times of crisis, the populist requires blaming *the others of the people* for preventing the people from achieving the object of their desire.¹⁷ As mentioned, the others outside the image of the self in the mirror could be the “big Others”—the grown-ups—or “small others,” babies with similar physical characteristics. The infant depends on the big Others, who feed and protect, and teach the dos and don’ts of the social environment, but perceives rivalry from the small others. The infant feels envy, jealousy, and anger toward the small others because he/she perceives a threat from them to his/her desired unity and coherence.¹⁸ They blame the small others for undermining their fulfillment. Applying this Lacanian logic to populism, Laclau claims that populist leaders point a finger at “the others,” who in the populist discourse are the reason for the unmet demands of “the people.” The people learn from their leaders to imagine that “the other” is fulfilled by stealing their object of desire and enjoyment. Through a discursive strategy, populist leaders shape the way people think and make them feel certain about what they lack and who is responsible therefor. They then convince their people to take action, mobilizing “the people” against “the other” to return what is stolen from them by restoring “the rule of the people” through an electoral victory. Thereby, they employ a discourse promising “the people” the fulfillment they ever lacked and desired. For this, they ask the people’s support to obtain power and preserve it in their name without sharing it with others such as state institutions, the elite, and the opposition.¹⁹

Having defined the symptoms of populism, this theoretical framework is now exten-

16 Benjamin Ardit, “Review Essay: Populism is Hegemony is Politics? On Ernesto Laclau’s On Populist Reason”, *Constellations* 17, no. 3 (2010): 494.

17 Ernesto Laclau, “Populism: What’s in a Name?”, in *Populism and Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Francesco Panizza (London: Verso, 2005), 38.

18 Robert Samuels, *Psychoanalyzing the Left and Right after Donald Trump: Conservatism, Liberalism, and Neoliberal Populisms* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 7-8.

19 Margaret Canovan, *Populism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1981), 9.

ded by exploring the models of populism entailing different constructions of “the people” unified and embodied as a result of either an economic, political, or cultural crisis as illustrated in Table 2. In the first model, the crisis is economic and the people’s unmet demand is welfare. In this model, the populist politician relies on excluded underdogs who are left out of the system, presenting them as “the real people.” For Peter Worsley, this kind of populism is neither right nor left, but inherently radical as it “...is the ideology of small rural people threatened by encroaching industrial and financial capital.”²⁰ This is the resentment of those segments of society who could not benefit from the fruits of industrialization and globalization, and those who became victims of this process. The populist leader provides this segment of society with a unifying identity with reference to their economic deprivation and to a set of idealized norms and values, which lead to a feeling of fulfilled-ness. While a right-wing populist would bring this group together by appealing to their traditions and religious beliefs, a left-wing populist would do so through a discourse emphasizing labor values or class-consciousness. In this identity formation process, the populist also refers to the upper classes and capitalist system as “the others of the people” who are imagined to be liable for the deprivation of their people. As a result, they try to win the electorate’s support by advocating economic welfare policies in favor of peasants, farmers, workers, artisans, and craftsmen alongside anti-systemic, anti-capitalist rhetoric.

The second model is derived from a political crisis during which the demand for representation is unmet. In this model, populist politicians present the majority, composed of ordinary men and women, as the totality of the people. They claim to be the voice of the silent masses, who feel underrepresented and desire to obtain political power. In addition to political underrepresentation and hunger for power, populist politicians use mediocre education, a lesser developed taste of arts and culture, and the mainstream lifestyles of the middle classes as common symbols to cluster them under their movement. Peter Wiles, for instance, defines populism as any movement based on the following proposition: “Virtue resides in the simple people, who are the overwhelming majority, and in their collective traditions.”²¹ They demonize the institutions of the establishment and elite, and label them as “the enemies of the people” who both disrespect “the people” and deprive them of the enjoyments of political power and representation. Populist movements of this kind finger point the elite with

20 Peter Worsley, *The Third World* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1967), 167.

21 Peter Wiles, “A Syndrome, Not a Doctrine: Some Elementary Theses on Populism”, in *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*, eds. Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1969), 166.

an exclusive discourse and demand change with an anti-systemic discourse in favor of “the real” people, the majority. In this sense, populism is the uprising of the ordinary man against the norms, values, and institutions of the establishment and elite who control the system.²²

Table 2. Models and Symptoms of Populism

Crisis	Unmet Demand	Common Symbols	The People	The Others
economic (populism model #1)	welfare	religious and traditional or class labor-based	victims of the system, underdogs, downtrodden	the rich the capitalist system
political (populism model #2)	representation	common sense virtue of middle classes	average citizens	elite and establishment
cultural (populism model #3)	unity/purity	National(ist) values	natives	non-natives foreign intruders

The third model seemingly occurs because of a cultural crisis ²³when the natives presented as “the people” in the discourse of a populist movement feel their unity is threatened by a different kind of “others” than elitists, namely migrants, non-natives, refugees, or political groups labeled as collaborators of foreign intruders. Here, “the people” refers to the members of a nation who share a common way of life, a native culture. In other words, common symbols of exclusionary nationalism and conservatism, which assume racial, national, or cultural superiority, accompany this kind of populism. Populist parties of this kind attempt to win voters’ support by articulating

22 See Benjamin De Cleen, “Populism and Nationalism”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 342-362.

23 Compare this with the “vertical-horizontal exclusion” of Y. Mény and Y. Surel, “The Constitutive Ambiguity of Populism”, in *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, eds. Y. Mény and Y. Surel (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 1-21.

a discourse “promoting the exclusion of all those who are not natives.”²⁴

To sum up, three models of populism rely on economic, political, or cultural crises. Having defined them and their symptoms, I now use this theoretical framework to explain the resilience and ever-growing support of religious conservative parties in Turkey. In the ensuing sections, I try to provide an explanation from a Laclauian perspective on how these parties availed themselves of the economic, political, and cultural crises continuously generated by Turkish politics and managed to appeal to the new and old victims of the system by constructing an identity around common symbols and deprivations.

National Order and Salvation, 1970–1980

One can trace the origins of religious conservatism in Turkey by examining the modernization efforts of the Ottomans in the 1800s. Ottoman modernization, which crystalized and transformed the traditional conflict between the center and periphery, resulted in the bifurcation of Ottoman society whereby two sets of institutions, old and new, existed side by side.²⁵ Similarly, two social groups of people emerged because of this bifurcation of the social structure. On one hand was a “center” composed of a small educated, secular, urban, and rational-bureaucratic elite, and on the other, a “periphery” that included the illiterate, religious, rural, and traditional masses. While Ottoman modernization meant the centralization and secularization of state institutions, the center’s inability to integrate the periphery into the new cultural framework led the traditional masses of the periphery to avail Islam as an ideological instrument to express their resentment against the center.²⁶ Unsurprisingly, opposition to Ottoman and Republican modernization in Turkey always had a religious coloring. Transition to multiparty democratic politics in 1946 required politicians in Turkey to appeal to the religious and traditional “periphery.” Thereby, religion became an effective tool for mobilizing voters. Eventually, a true Islamist party emerged in 1970, when the periphery was under the stress of an economic crisis, with a promise to re-

24 Cas Mudde, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, “Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America”, *Government and Opposition* 48, no. 2 (2013): 163.

25 For Mardin, the major social confrontation in the Ottoman Empire was unidimensional in the form of “... a clash between the center and the periphery.” See Şerif Mardin, “Center-Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics?”, *Daedalus* 102, no. 1 (1973): 170.

26 Mardin, “Center-Periphery,” 179.

solve it with Islamic recipes.²⁷

Indeed, the crisis of the import substitution model of economic development (ISI) paved the way for the adoption of an Islamist-populist strategy appealing to the periphery as victims of unbalanced economic growth. In this model, large industrialists based in Istanbul received a larger share of the market, whereas the economic position of small enterprises located in peripheral Turkey deteriorated.²⁸ The global financial crises and stagflation of the 1970s added to the severity of the situation. To revitalize the economy, the governments of “the center” preferred to side with the business elite in Istanbul, who promised to bring in foreign partners and investment. Nevertheless, the entrance of international brands into the national market with Turkish partners from Istanbul worsened the economic decline of small merchants and producers in mainland Anatolia.

Hit hard by the crisis, “the periphery” including the smaller producers, merchants, farmers, and craftsmen first voiced their resentment within the incumbent Justice Party (JP) that they had supported. However, their opposition fell on the deaf ears of Süleyman Demirel, the prime minister of the mainstream right-wing JP government in the second half of the 1960s.²⁹ As a result, they began feeling abandoned by their own party. However, the left could not provide an alternative. Represented by the Republican People’s Party, the left in Turkey was too secular from the perspective of the voters alienated by the mainstream right. They were now politically homeless but ready to re-align around an oppositional movement. As a result, the right became fragmented, and smaller opposition groups emerged with a promise to cope with the crisis.³⁰ Most of these newly emerging groups wanted to appeal to the religious and traditional pulse among dissatisfied constituents. At this stage, Islamism was a good alternative as an opposition ideology to express their disappointment with the system. They began advocating change through a religious-conservative mindset, although

27 For an alternative explanation to the rise of political Islam in Turkey see Ateş Altınordu, “The Politicization of Religion: Political Catholicism and Political Islam in Comparative Perspective”, *Politics & Society* 38, no. 4 (2010): 517–51.

28 Ahmet Yücekök, *100 Soruda Din ve Siyaset* (Ankara: Gerçek Kitabevi, 1983).

29 Feroz Ahmad, “The Political Power of the Turkish Bourgeoisie Has Been Increasing with Every Decade”, in *MERIP Reports*, no. 84 (1980): 19-22.

30 The proportional electoral system introduced by the 1961 Constitution also played a role in this fragmentation. See Ergun Özbudun, “The Turkish Party System: Institutionalization, Polarization, and Fragmentation”, *Middle Eastern Studies* 17, no. 2 (1981): 231.

this might seem a contradiction.

Under these conditions, Necmettin Erbakan (1926–2011), a young and promising engineer, emerged as a promising leader. As a respected professor and a pious, traditional investor, he established strong relations with the religious, nationalist petty bourgeoisie of Anatolia and was elected the General Secretary of the Union of Chambers of Commerce (TOBB), the largest business association in Turkey, in 1966.³¹ Subsequently, he was elected chairman of the Union, again with the support of the members representing the chambers in Anatolia, despite the opposition of the government in May 1969.³² However, as an Islamist, he was not welcomed by the government. Soon after taking the post, Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel canceled the election and forced him out of office in August 1969.³³

This gave Necmettin Erbakan a reason to consider joining Demirel’s Justice Party and running in the parliamentary elections. He likely thought this would give him the opportunity to rise in the ranks of the party as an alternative leader. Probably thinking similarly, Süleyman Demirel vetoed his application to become a Justice Party candidate in the parliamentary elections in 1969.³⁴ He was left with no choice but to run as an independent candidate.³⁵ To the surprise of the Justice Party, he got enough electoral support to become an MP from Konya, a semi-industrial city in Anatolia with a dominant religious-conservative constituency. In parliament, he collaborated with two other MPs in the Justice Party who shared similar religious and political views. Eventually, they exited the Justice Party and joined Erbakan to establish the National Order Party (NOP) on January 26, 1970.

In parliament, Erbakan became the voice of small and medium-sized investments in the periphery. He once contended in parliament that providing opportunities to only a small and privileged group of investors was not the right recipe for Turkey’s development. Instead, he advocated a policy allowing full-scale, nationwide economic

31 “Özel Sektör için Altın Devir Açılıyor”, *Milliyet*, November 6, 1966, 3.

32 “Erbakan Başkanlık Koltuğuna Oturdu”, *Milliyet*, May 28, 1969, 2.

33 Rafet Genç, “Batur’u Koltuğa Polis Oturttu”, *Milliyet*, August 9, 1969, 1.

34 “Erbakan, Çok Büyük ve Mühim Netice Doğabilir”, *Milliyet*, August 21, 1969, 1.

35 “Erbakan, Konya’dan Bağımsız Aday Oluyor”, *Milliyet*, August 28, 1969, 1.

development that should include merchants of Anatolia.³⁶In his public speeches, he added religiosity to his development model. Referring to Israel and Japan, he claimed the two nations owe their growth rate and development to their belief in and respect for religion, and emphasized that Turkey should follow their example.³⁷

However, the secular establishment did not welcome his emphasis on religion. The Constitutional Court closed down his party on May 20, 1971, with the accusation of acting against the secular nature of the Republic.³⁸ Shortly after the Court's decision, Erbakan brought his NOP cadres together and re-registered his party under a new brand, the National Salvation Party (NSP), on October 11, 1972. This one could survive the ups and downs of Turkish politics and played a significant role in and outside parliament in the 1970s.

The success of the party is mostly associated with its leader, Necmettin Erbakan, who adopted a populist discourse appealing to the lower and middle classes in peripheral Anatolia, whose economic conditions deteriorated throughout the sixties and seventies. Erbakan availed himself of the economic difficulties of the segments of society who “equated growing capitalism with immorality, dishonesty, and wheeling-dealing.”³⁹ He united them with reference to what they lack and desire, namely social justice and economic welfare. He also united them with reference to what they already had in common, namely their religious and traditional values. He eventually used Islamic-populist discourse to create “the other” of his people, which included those affluent but immoral. He criticized the governments for supporting only a few major holding companies, which collaborate with international monopolies, acting “as lackeys of the Christian/Jewish West.”⁴⁰Labeling the social democratic left as “communist” and liberal right as “cosmopolitan, freemason, and Zionist,” he promised a “national vision” (*milli görüş*) for the disgruntled elements that felt more comfortable with religion in their lives. Blaming the immoral capitalism for the suffering of his people, he advocated “change” to bring salvation (*selamet*) through his national vision in which the lower-middle classes would have better access to economic welfare

36 *Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Tutanak Dergisi* 17, no. 2 (Dec. 9, 1969): 517-518.

37 Necmettin Erbakan's Speech at Çankaya Coffehouse in Tekirdağ on Jul. 9, 1970 quoted in *Anayasa Mahkemesi Kararlar Dergisi* no. 9 (1972): 5.

38 *Anayasa Mahkemesi Kararlar Dergisi*, 1-70.

39 Mehmet Yaşar Geyikdağı, *Political parties in Turkey: the Role of Islam* (New York: Praeger, 1984), 118.

40 Feroz Ahmad, *Turkey: The Quest for Identity* (London: One World, 2014), 132.

while preserving their values.

In his national order (*milli nizam*), Erbakan appealed to the deprived segments of society with a program against the competitive market economy, interest-based financial structure, and European Economic Community. Instead, he advocated state intervention and the development of heavy industry as a remedy to widespread unemployment among “the people.” Moreover, he combined this economic policy with discourse on national and moral development and the preservation of people’s moral values and virtue:

The sad experiences we had in the past proved that it is not possible to have material development without moral development. The worldly left and liberal are distant from responding to the demands of the nation because their visions are in moral negligence and rely only on material development. They are misleading and incomplete. They generate neither felicity nor salvation. Morality and spirituality constitute the foundation of felicity. This is why we have to achieve our material development simultaneously with an effort for the completion of our moral development.⁴¹

In short, Erbakan of the religious-conservative parties of the seventies made an appeal to lower income groups and small and medium-sized enterprises in Anatolia through a discourse entailing both the preservation of moral values and promotion of the economic interests of small producers, merchants, and craftsmen. Illustrating all symptoms of a Laclauian populist strategy, Erbakan availed himself of “an economic crisis,” appealing to the “unmet demands” of the economic welfare of the people who are mostly comprised of the victims of the system. He brought together a segment of society, totalized them as “the people” with reference to the “common symbols” derived from religion, morality, and tradition as opposed to “the enemies of the people,” who are imagined to be in the service of infidel capitalism as Table 3 shows.

With this strategy, the National Salvation Party (NSP) garnered 11.8 and 8.5 percent of the vote in the 1973 and 1977 general elections, respectively. In the second half of the seventies, NSP became a key party in the formation of coalition governments, first with the secular Republican People’s Party (RPP) and then with the right-wing parties of “the nationalist front.” In these coalition governments, Erbakan’s National Salvation enjoyed a leverage and influence disproportionate to its electoral support and number of seats in parliament. This was mostly because it was the only

41 Milli Selamet Partisi, *1977 Seçimleri Afiş ve Sloganları* (Ankara: Milli Selamet Partisi Yayınları, 1977), 7.

right-wing party that could leave “the nationalist front” and establish an alternative coalition government with the leftist-populist RPP for the sake of a just order in the name of “the people.”

Table 3. Symptoms of NOP and NSP’s Populism

Populism	Model #1
Crisis	The crisis of the ISI model of economic development
Unmet Demand	Economic welfare
Common Symbols	Religion and tradition, moral values
The People	Small merchants and craftsmen, small and medium-sized enterprises in the periphery
The Others	Those who are affluent but immoral who collaborate with infidel capitalism at the center; “communists” on the left and “masons, cosmopolitans, and Zionists” on the right

Populism of the Welfare and Virtue Parties, 1983–2001

The journey of the National Salvation Party ended when the Turkish army gave a break to democracy on September 12, 1980. The generals closed down parliament and prohibited the activities of all political parties, unions, and associations in the country, thereby establishing their own military regime for the next three years. By the end of their regime, the military left a new constitution prohibiting the formation of parties with ties to the pre-1980 political parties.⁴² From a Lacanian perspective, the military regime was the encounter of Turkish politics with “the real,” intruding and disrupting its imaginary and symbolic harmony.⁴³ Society’s traumatic experience with the army destroyed former identifications with small and big others, at least in the political sphere of life. This crisis dissipated existing voting patterns and dismantled party affiliations. As a result of the military intervention, people became politically abandoned, displaced, and dispossessed. This was a moment for a populist opportunity to re-align voters around a new leader and party by offering a new identity with a new discourse.

With the transition from the military regime to multiparty system, old parties emerged under new banners alongside newcomers such as PM Turgut Özal’s Motherland

42 Birol Yeşilada, “Problems of Political Development in the Third Turkish Republic”, *Polity* 21, no. 2 (1988): 355.

43 See Gregory Bistoën, *Trauma, Ethics and the Political beyond PTSD* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 53-82.

Party (MP). Furthermore, the Welfare Party (WP) was established on July 19, 1983 to resume the program and ideology of the National Salvation Party, although the leader was under political prohibition. Hindered by the military regime and shadowed by the populist success of Özal, the WP maintained a lower profile throughout the 1980s. To return to power with a populist strategy, the WP had to wait for another set of economic and political crises that cracked the mirror Özal was holding. The four strands of Turkish politics Özal claimed to unite began to break up after a referendum on the political liberties of leaders banned from politics with the 1982 Constitution imposed by the military regime. Once liberated from their restrictions, the leaders of the previous decade returned, either by taking over the chair of successor parties or by establishing a new party. They targeted the imaginary unity constructed by Özal among different segments of society. In addition, Özal's support base was already disillusioned with him because of a downturn in the economy, rumors of corruption about his family, and administrative failings such as the rise of a Kurdish insurgency in the Southeast. The accumulated uneasiness of the constituency came to maturity when Özal was elected President of the Republic by the members of his party in parliament in 1989. Having to leave the leadership of his party as president, his party was dragged into a chaotic leadership battle that left his constituency disorganized and fragmented.

This gave other party leaders an opportunity to re-unify and capture those who left Özal's support base. Any leader, from the left or right, who could hold a mirror to these segments of society from an angle that would make them appear united, would succeed in re-establishing a new base and new people. This involved convincing them through a populist discourse that they were complete and fully mastered.

Necmettin Erbakan was among the leaders who returned to active politics after the 1987 referendum. In this new period, he aimed to enlarge his support base by appealing to the segments of society who felt abandoned by Özal, and disappointed with the left-wing Social Democratic Populist Party (SDP) and right-wing True-Path Party (TPP). Again, as a mOther in the mirror phase, he began telling the victims and dissidents of this new decade "who they are" and "who they should become" with reference to what they lack, namely their unmet demands. He thereby started another process of constructing his people from a wider perspective to include new groups of disaffected voters that did not exist in the 1970s. The first group, Erbakan wanted to appeal to, was lower-income religious conservatives who had unmet demands for better living standards, modernization, and urbanization in their neighborhoods, together with a socio-political environment where they could preserve their religious and traditional values. The second group, who fell apart from Özal's support base

and remained dissatisfied with center-right and center-left parties, was the religious conservatives, who felt socially ignored and unrepresented, although their financial situation improved in the decade of Özal. This newly emerging Muslim bourgeoisie demanded not only good governance of the economy, but also a fair administration granting them respect and recognition among the power and business elite in Turkey. The third group that stopped looking up to Özal as a unifying big Other was the religious Kurds. Despite Özal's promises to integrate Kurds into the system as equal citizens, an increase in PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) insurgency led to further suppression of the ethno-cultural rights of the Kurds in Turkey in the 1980s. As a result, religious Kurds began looking for alternative means of liberating their ethnic and religious identities without resorting to an armed struggle.

It was needed at this stage to give these groups a vision of their future reflection in a mirror when and if they are united and acting together. It is a future reflection in which all their distinct demands and desires, as yet unfulfilled, would be fully satisfied. Erbakan already had a "national view" for this purpose. In the late 1980s, he further developed his national view into a discourse of *adil düzen*, "the just order," as the ultimate stage of justice and fairness. Different from his discourse in the 1970s, he added universal human rights and membership in the European Union (EU) into the older version of his national view, which had only included a reference to common symbols of religion, tradition, and morality. He even saluted American-style secularism as long as it offers an alternative method to protect his people's religious freedoms. Erbakan was uniting and mobilizing his "people" toward an order in which they would reach a stage of "welfare" and "felicity" with a higher income, equal representation, ethnic and religious respect, and recognition—without injustice, prejudice and discrimination. Wanting to believe in the possibility of this order, the various segments of society began to gather around Erbakan.

However, his utopic *adil düzen* was impossible. Even some Islamists were skeptical about its attainability. Nevertheless, the discourse of *adil düzen* was successful as long as it united Erbakan's people, its real intent. However, to preserve unity, Erbakan needed a scapegoat for the failure of his project. For this, he needed to blame "the others" who prevented the coming of the prosperous and glorious days of the *adil düzen*. As another element of his populist strategy, Erbakan started a holy war, a *jihad*, by declaring himself a *mujahed* fighting against those preventing his people from reaching the religiously colored, imaginary just order. In his *jihad*, he held "the Kemalist establishment at home" and "Zionism in the world" responsible for the delay of his holy just order, which would liberate his Muslim compatriots from any

social, political, and economic injustice. For him, Kemalism had betrayed the people with a preference for Western values over the natives' moral and spiritual values. Kemalist modernization hijacked the welfare of his people by turning their back on the religious and indigenous Ottoman past. One should break away from the Western mimicry of Kemalism to reach moral development, which would bring about social, economic, and political welfare. Thus, as long as we have the Kemalist elite and establishment in Turkey, his *adil düzen* will be deferred. Another obstacle to the coming of the *adil düzen* was “the Jew” and “freemason,” who were imagined to be ruling the world behind the scenes. Erbakan imagined a “Zionist Jew” who prevented Muslims from fulfilling themselves and recruited Muslim fellows into freemasonry, promoted them to become the ruling elite of their country, and turned them into agents of his single world government. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, Erbakan imagined communism as part of a Zionist conspiracy to rule the world. He considered this “Zionist Jew” the source of all evils. In Turkey, he presented this imagined “Jew” as the “other” thwarting his people, preventing the establishment of his just order.

Table 4. Welfare and Virtue Parties' Symptoms of Populism

Populism	Model #1
Crisis	A series of political, social, and economic crises
Unmet Demand	Economic welfare, good governance, inclusion among the power and business elite, and recognition of Kurdish ethnic identity
Common Symbols	A narrative of just order woven around religious, moral, and traditional values of the native Muslims
The People	A holy coalition of the lower-middle classes, Muslim bourgeoisie, and pious Kurds
The Others	The Kemalist at home, the Zionist in the world

To liberate his people from the domination of these evil powers, Mujaheed Erbakan suggested Turkey's withdrawal from NATO and promoted the Islamic dinar as the hard currency of Muslim countries against the dollar of the “imperialist, Zionist system.” This would end the interest-based financial system and construction of a better working state apparatus by ending corruption.⁴⁴ He constructed his “people” by appealing to their religious and traditional values, and to their resentment against the establishment in Turkey. He presented himself as the only one who would save the people from the Western mimicry of the Kemalist elite and establishment, and from

44 Jenny B. White, “Pragmatists or Ideologues? Turkey's Welfare Party in Power”, *Current History* 96, (1997): 27.

the secret governance of the world by the Zionist Jew.

This populist strategy as summarized in Table 4 paid off well, and the WP succeeded in garnering the votes of those discontented with the performance of mainstream parties. The Turco-Islamic identity manufactured by the coup in 1980 also contributed to this trend, and consequently, enlarged the support base of the WP. Its share of vote in the general elections increased from 7.2 percent in 1987 to 16.9 percent in 1991 by forming a pre-election coalition with the Nationalist Task Party and Reformist Democracy Party, widely known as “the holy alliance” of religious, conservative, and nationalist parties. His movement gained further momentum after the 1994 economic crisis, which brought Erbakan a victory in the municipal elections. Subsequently, the WP finished ahead of all others in the December 1995 parliamentary elections with 21.4 percent of the votes.

This electoral victory allowed the WP to form a coalition government with the right-wing True-Path Party, which was known as the Welfare-Path coalition. During their term in office, the Welfarists pursued a pragmatic attitude and back-pedaled from most of their pre-election promises. Nevertheless, the Welfare-Path coalition was “Islamist” enough to disturb the armed forces who regarded themselves the guardian of secular Republic. The National Security Council dominated by the generals convened on February 28, 1997, and declared “political Islam” a major threat to the national security of Turkey. Losing ground for direct involvement in the form of a coup, the army increased its visibility during the post-modern coup of February 28, 1997 without feeling the need to close down the parliament.⁴⁵As a result of this limited intervention targeting only political Islam, Erbakan first resigned from his post in June 1997. Following that, the Chief Public Prosecutor of the High Court of Appeals filed a suit in the Constitutional Court requesting the dissolution of the WP.

Expecting the Constitutional Court to hand down a decision that would close down their party, a small group of Erbakan followers established the Virtue Party (VP) in December 1997 to reincarnate their party under a different brand. Upon receiving the decision of the Court in January 1998, 150 members of parliament, who were members of the governing party a few months ago, moved into the VP to reinvigorate the WP. The Court’s decision also banned Erbakan from being the official leader of the party for the next five years, dragging the party into a leadership crisis among party

45 Soli Özel, “Turkey at the Polls: After the Tsunami”, *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 2 (2003): 87-88.

members and bringing two factions in the WP to the surface: the liberal reformists and conservative traditionalists.

The two groups differed in their choice of “the people” as their prospective constituency rather than in their ideology. The liberal reformists wanted to reach larger segments of Turkish society by appealing to the demands of ordinary men, whereas the conservative traditionalists advocated a continuation in their appeal to the victims of the system. Therefore, the reformists were less radical and even systemic in their populist discourse. However, the traditionalists insisted on an anti-systemic, religious-conservative discourse demonizing capitalism, the West, and Zionism. For their choice of leaders, the reformists were represented by Abdullah Gül, a promising politician with an academic background. He was endorsed by other reformists including Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the successful mayor of Istanbul, who proved himself to ordinary men as an honest politician capable of good governance and unsullied by the corruption of the mainstream parties. On the other hand, the leadership of the traditionalists comprised Erbakan and his older and less charismatic compatriots. Known as the old school of the old men, they were respected by regular conservative supporters but less attractive to the majority of ordinary men in Turkey. The competition between the reformists and traditionalists ended with the election of the traditionalist Recai Kutan as the new chair of the party with 633 votes against 521 cast for the reformist Abdullah Gül at the party congress in May 1998.

It seems that Erbakan failed to read the change taking place among Turkish voters, particularly among his own support base. When his traditional support base was joining the middle classes, Erbakan insisted on a discourse appealing to the victims of the system. After January 24, 1980, the Turkish economy transformed into an export-oriented economy and abandoned import-substitution in the 1960s and 1970s. This new model of development combined with the post-Fordist production style unexpectedly increased the welfare of small and medium-sized producers in Anatolia. Specialized to produce industrial components, these small producers unexpectedly became Anatolian tigers well integrated into the world economy. They were no longer victims of globalization, although they remained religious and traditional. Rather than an anti-capitalist discourse, this newly emerging Muslim bourgeoisie was in favor of implementing neo-liberal economic policies. In addition, the victims of the system no longer considered Erbakan their savior. From victims’ perspective, someone recently defeated by the system and victimized cannot fight for their cause. At that time, Erbakan was not in a position to convince disenfranchised Muslims that he would succeed in his jihad against the evil powers. Consequently, Erbakan and his

traditionalists failed to switch the party's discourse and preferred to appeal only to the victims rather than the majority of ordinary citizens. This strategy only won 15.4 percent of the votes in the 1999 elections, a slightly more than 5 percent loss compared to the WP's support in the 1995 elections.

The next four years witnessed ups and downs both for Turkish politics and the religious-conservative movement now represented by the VP. From their first day in parliament, members of the VP were accused of acting against the secular nature of the regime. Erbakan and his traditionalists focused on the survival of their movement rather than following a reformist strategy to turn this victimization into an opportunity to mobilize people and enlarge their support base. In addition, the continuous involvement of the military in political affairs via the National Security Council further reduced their presence in daily politics. Eventually, this process reached a stage in which the Constitutional Court decided to dissolve the VP in June 2001. The Court thereby created an opportunity for the liberal reformists to appeal to the ordinary man on the street with a novel populist discourse. This took place when they established the Justice and Development Party (JDP) in August 2001. The traditionalists, however, insisted on their old style, emphasizing continuity with the past, and established the Felicity Party (FP) in July 2001. This party preserved its appeal to the victims and until now, have failed to reach the masses. Therefore, we focus on the populism of the JDP below.

The Emergence of JDP Populism, 2001–2002

Just prior to the establishment of the JDP, Turkish politics was experiencing a series of political and economic crises. As mentioned, crises play a significant role in the design of populist strategies by destroying existing identities in society and opening a space for the formation of new ones. In Lacanian terms, the mirror of the old system breaks with crises, giving new leaders an opportunity to raise their own mirror to the people and to offer them an un-fractured image and reflection via a populist discourse.

The events that occurred in the late 1990s and early 2000s had a similar impact to a crisis on voters. The first crack appeared when a massive earthquake hit the industrial northwestern region of Turkey in August 1999. The masses became enraged as the government failed to provide effective and immediate relief to the victims. Following the earthquake, the easy capture of Hezbollah leaders and members in the early 2000s also made people question the link between the state and Hezbollah in

the former's fight against PKK.⁴⁶ Eventually, people began losing faith in mainstream parties, especially so in the parties of the coalition government when in early 2001, Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit made public the argument over accusations of corruption between him and President Ahmet Necdet Sezer. This became one of the worst crises the Turkish economy experienced.⁴⁷

In addition to this economic crisis, Turkey again went into a political crisis when Prime Minister Ecevit was hospitalized. His ailing health created a leadership crisis for his party and the whole country, as he refused to step down from the party chair and the premiership. Reports about his dire health situation were immediately reflected in the stock market and foreign currency exchanges. As a result, people lost their confidence in Ecevit's Democratic Left Party and in the right-wing Motherland and Nationalist Action parties in coalition with it.

As an increasing number of people felt alienated from the party they voted for, the political context ripened for the rise of a new party with a new leader who would offer a new identity for the frustrated masses. From a Laclauian perspective, conditions were ideal for a populist strategy. First, a deepening crisis generated unfulfilled demands for welfare, jobs, and prosperity. Although the previous World Bank economist Kemal Derviş reached an agreement with the IMF as the newly appointed Turkish Minister of Economy, a cure for the economy could only be attempted by a strong government with significant public support.⁴⁸ The coalition government was too fragile. People were expecting a new face who could re-unite them as leaders with a new discourse and new identity.

In this context, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his reformist group broke away from the VP's conservative wing. Different from Erbakan's populist strategies, Erdoğan adopted a catch-all approach appealing to all segments of society including those who had never voted for a religious conservative party.⁴⁹ He redefined "the people" by bringing

46 Felat Bozaslan, "27 Yıldır Aydınlatılmayan Sır: Devlet-Hizbullah İlişkisi", *Deutsche Welle Türkçe*, June 4, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/tr/27-y%C4%B1ld%C4%B1r-ayd%C4%B1nlat%C4%B1lamayan-s%C4%B1r-devlet-hizbullah-ili%C5%9Fkisi/a-49046862>.

47 "Sınırlı Devalüasyon", *Cumhuriyet*, February 22, 2001, 1.

48 See Ziya Öniş, "Turgut Özal and his Economic Legacy: Turkish Neo-Liberalism in Critical Perspective", *Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 4 (2004): 118.

49 See Ali Çarkoğlu, "Turkey's November 2002 Elections: A New Beginning?", *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 6, no. 4 (2002): 30-41.

different groups together who were already disassociated from their parties. In fact, many religious associations and foundations, which previously supported Erbakan, realigned with Erdoğan's JDP.⁵⁰ The newly emerging bourgeoisie of Anatolia, who remained culturally religious and traditional while improving economically during Özal's tenure, also joined Erdoğan's support base. Even secular bourgeoisie recognized the rise of the JDP as an alternative that could re-establish economic stability in Turkey.

At this stage, a discourse was needed that would help these segments recognize their reflection in a mirror and imagine themselves as part of a whole. Erdoğan adopted a discourse with reference to common symbols not based on religious values, but good governance based on IMF prescriptions and EU norms. To this effect, Erdoğan stated that the new party is not a continuation of the old ones. As times had changed, he said, they have also changed and adapted to world conditions.⁵¹ He was a supporter of the competitive market economy, economic prescriptions of the IMF, and promoted Turkey's membership process to the EU. Liberal segments of Turkish society also joined his "people" after the emphasis on the free-market economy and political liberalization aligned with EU standards.⁵²

His track record in establishing good governance in the Istanbul municipality further supported this rhetoric. Most important, his party would be free from corruption as the official abbreviation of the party's title suggested: the AK (White/Clean) Party. As opposed to "the people" he wanted to unite, he referred to "the others of the people," which prevents them from having what they desire. He indicated that the corrupted elite and mainstream parties hindered Turkey's economic growth and political liberalization. As they mismanaged Turkey's politics and economy, the parties of "old Turkey" were solely responsible for the lack of what "people" desired and therefore for their suffering (unmet demands). To remedy this, he advocated change in the name of "the people" to satisfy what people demanded by rebuilding economic stability and good governance in Turkey.

50 William Hale, "Christian Democracy and the AKP: Parallels and Contrasts", *Turkish Studies* 6, no. 2 (2005): 305-306.

51 Douglas Frantz, "Turkey, Well Along Road to Secularism, Fears Detour to Islamism", *The New York Times*, January 8, 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/01/08/world/turkey-well-along-road-to-secularism-fears-detour-to-islamism.html>.

52 Nora Onar, "Kemalists, Islamists, and Liberals: Shifting Patterns of Confrontation and Consensus, 2002-06", *Turkish Studies* 8, no. 2 (2007): 273.

Table 5. Symptoms of JDP's Populism, 2002

Populism	Model #2
Crisis	Clash between PM and President leading to an economic crisis
Unmet Demand	Good governance and economic stability
Common Symbols	IMF neoliberalism, EU pluralism, and Anatolian conservatism
The People	Victims of economic crisis from all segments of society
The Others	The “corrupted” mainstream parties of the left and right

As a result of this populist strategy summarized above in Table 5, Erdoğan created a flow from all other parties toward his newly established JDP. The 2002 elections yielded the highest electoral volatility ever in the history of multi-party politics in Turkey.⁵³ Slightly more than 50 percent of voters changed their party preference and voted for another party in 2002 in comparison to the 1999 parliamentary elections.⁵⁴ The JDP won 363 seats, garnering more than 34.3 percent of the votes. The FP, which insisted on appealing to the religious, traditional victims of the system, received only 2.5 percent of the votes. This was the beginning of a new era in Turkish politics, with the JDP in government introducing dramatic changes in the country's social, economic, and political structure.

Erdoğan vs. Old Turkey: Populism of JDP, 2002–2007

During its first term in office, the JDP government implemented several democratization reforms in line with the EU accession process and remained loyal to the previous IMF economic reform program. As such, the government kept its pre-electoral promise for political and economic liberalization. However, things became complicated when the government wanted to liberate the turban, the Islamic headscarf, in public places.⁵⁵ This revived the *kulturkampf* between religious conservatives and modernist secularists in society.⁵⁶ The government also wanted to revise the university entrance

53 Sabri Sayarı, “Towards a New Turkish Party System?”, *Turkish Studies* 8, no. 2 (2007): 200.

54 Sayarı, “Towards a New”.

55 Pinar Tank, “Political Islam in Turkey: A State of Controlled Secularity”, *Turkish Studies* 6, no. 1 (2005): 12; Rabia Karakaya Polat, “The 2007 Parliamentary Elections in Turkey: Between Securitisation and Desecuritisation”, *Parliamentary Affairs* 62, no. 1 (2009): 137-138.

56 Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, “Kulturkampf and Voting Behaviour in Turkey: A Key to Turkist Party Politics?”. In *Elections and Public Opinion in Turkey*, edited by Ali Çarkoğlu and Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, 133-56. London: Routledge, 2021.

system to allow graduates of religious high schools to pursue careers in disciplines other than Islamic theology, a considerable change from the previous restrictions.⁵⁷ From the secularists' perspective, these were attempts to transform Turkey into an Islamic state.

The tension between the two groups peaked before the 2007 presidential elections. When the JDP government nominated Abdullah Gül for the presidency, the secularists opposed him because his wife wore the Islamic headscarf. To block his election, the main opposition RPP boycotted the electoral sessions in parliament. Failing to reach the quorum of 367 parliamentarians, the JDP majority in parliament could not elect the president. Furthermore, the Constitutional Court, Turkish Armed Forces, and Council of University Education postured over the issue, either opposing Abdullah Gül's election⁵⁸ or supporting the RPP's boycott hindering it.

This institutional gridlock was a crisis that led to a sense of impotence despite having the majority in parliament. From the government's perspective, the secularist establishment was preventing "the people" from ruling themselves, and their demands for representation were denied. Unmet demands because of a crisis usually set the stage for a populist campaign, and this incident was not an exception. As a response to the crisis, the JDP initially declared that their aim was to set the will of the nation free. To this end, they attempted to amend several articles of the constitution so that presidents would be elected by popular vote.⁵⁹ However, this motion was vetoed by the incumbent, President Ahmet Necdet Sezer. When all institutional methods to elect their own candidates were exhausted, the JDP leader Erdoğan turned this gridlock into a populist strategy, deciding to take his cause to "the bosom of the nation."⁶⁰ He called for both a referendum regarding amendments and a general election.

During the electoral campaign, Erdoğan appealed to his people, who were frustrated with this crisis. Unlike the JDP's populist campaign in 2002, here, it was not intended to unite alienated and fragmented voters of mainstream parties to create a support

57 Ayhan Kaya, "Islamisation of Turkey under the AKP Rule: Empowering Family, Faith and Charity", *South European Society and Politics* 20, no. 1, (2015): 56.

58 Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, "Politics of Conservatism in Turkey", *Turkish Studies* 8, no. 2 (2007): 247.

59 Canan Balkır, "The July 2007 Elections in Turkey: A Test for Democracy", *Mediterranean Politics* 12, no. 3 (2007): 416.

60 Dinçşahin, "A Symptomatic Analysis of the Justice and Development", 633.

base from scratch. Rather, the aim was to consolidate and enlarge an already existing support base with the arrival of new-comers discontent with the establishment. In the second wave of his populism as shown in Table 6, Erdoğan referred to the historical gap between the state and people as a common symbol of his discourse. He once said: “If the state does not embrace the people, if the state and the people turn their faces towards opposing directions, the outcome of this would only be injustice, persecution and suppression.”⁶¹ He thereby defined an antagonism between the state of “old Turkey” and the people of his imaginary “new Turkey.” From Erdoğan’s viewpoint, the institutions of the “old Turkey,” including the Presidency, Constitutional Court, Armed Forces, Council of University Education, and main opposition RPP formed an alliance to prevent people from achieving power. By preventing the majority in parliament from electing the president, these institutions blocked the “will of the people,” and thereby became the enemies of the people.

Table 6. Symptoms of JDP’s Populism, 2002–2007

Populism	Model #2
Crisis	Crisis over the presidential elections
Unmet Demand	Representation
Common Symbols	The long existing gap between “the state” and “the people” in Turkey
The People	Ordinary people discontent with the establishment
The Others	The institutions of “old Turkey,” the elite and the establishment

With this populist-discursive strategy, the JDP won an electoral victory in July 2007 with 46.6 percent of the vote and 341 seats in parliament.⁶² Following the elections, the Nationalist Action Party, which was concerned with an expedient coalition between the JDP and Kurdish nationalists, facilitated the election of the president among the ranks of the JDP.⁶³ While this crisis was over, it was not the last one that paved the

61 “Milletin Adamı Erdoğan Belgeseli”, *Ülke TV*, episode 1, <https://www.ulketv.co.tr/belgesel-arsiv/belgesel-milletin-adami-erdogan>.

62 Alternatively, Ocaklı claimed that local party organization and elite incorporation were the key factors in how JDP attracted non-core supporters and continued its electoral success in 2007 general elections. See Feryaz Ocaklı, “Notable Networks: Elite Recruitment, Organizational Cohesiveness, and Islamist Electoral Success in Turkey”, *Politics & Society* 43, no. 3 (2015): 385–413.

63 See Ali Çarkoğlu, “A New Electoral Victory for the ‘Pro-Islamists’ or the ‘New Centre-Right’? The Justice and Development Party Phenomenon in the July 2007 Parliamentary Elections in Turkey”, *South European Society & Politics* 12, no. 4 (2007): 501-519.

way for populist electoral strategies yielding electoral victories for the JDP.

Demilitarization of Politics as Another Wave of Populism, 2007–2011

In the second term, the JDP captured the authoritarian state structure as consolidated by the military regime between 1980 and 1983. With the aid of the Gülenist Islamic group, the party turned the centralized institutions of the state against “the others” of the people including bureaucracy, the media, university, and opposition in general. Relying on the populist momentum created by the gridlock over the presidential elections in 2007, the JDP and its leadership continued to dwell on the traditional gap between the establishment and people. However, the crisis was now over, since the party could elect Abdullah Gül as the 11th president of the Republic in August 2007 when members of the Nationalist Action Party (NAP) agreed to participate in the voting sessions to vote for their own candidate, fulfilling the quorum requirement in the assembly.

The crises that helped the JDP consolidate and enlarge its support base in its second term in office emerged when media outlets close to government circles publicized a series of coup plots. The first round of arrests of oppositional figures and some army officers and generals took place following the electoral victory of the party in 2007.⁶⁴ In early 2010, the pro-government Gülenist newspaper *Taraf* published the Sledgehammer Operation plans allegedly prepared by the first army as a coup plot to overthrow the government.⁶⁵ Arrests of opposition members and officers ensued just a year before the next elections in 2011. The risk of a coup wanting to remove the legitimately elected government was a new crisis the JDP government fomented to consolidate its electoral support and convince victims of the previous junta administrations to join their party’s ranks.

This crisis resurfaced the unmet demand for the civilianization of politics by eliminating the role of the military in Turkey. The military interventions in 1960, 1971, 1980, and 1997 left large segments of society traumatized. After a return to democracy in 1983, politics in Turkey were still haunted by the over-sized presence of the military, which constitutionalized its interference in daily political affairs via the National

64 Ersel Aydın, “Ergenekon, New Pacts, and the Decline of the Turkish Inner State”, *Turkish Studies* 12, no. 2 (2011): 232-234.

65 For a critical perspective see Dani Rodrik, “Ergenekon and Sledgehammer: Building or Undermining the Rule of Law”, *Turkish Political Quarterly* 10, no.1 (2011): 99-109.

Security Council.⁶⁶ The Turkish Armed Forces were also politically active during the process before the presidential elections in 2007, which led to institutional gridlock. This never-ending presence of the military in daily political affairs perpetuated the traumatic memory of the coups. Democratization and civilianization of politics thereby became an unmet demand, an object of desire that could unite and mobilize many people from different segments of society.

Toward a third election since the establishment of the JDP, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan again adopted a populist discourse as in Table 7, appealing to those frustrated by the role of the Turkish army in politics. In addition to his existing grassroots support, Erdoğan implemented a strategy to reconstruct the people in a way that included the victims of previous military interim regimes and dissidents of the military tutelage over democracy, both from the left and right. He also appealed to ethnic and religious minorities who suffered from the activities of the secularist yet Sunni, modernist yet nationalist semi-military establishment in Turkey. In this context, Erdoğan started his “openings” toward Kurds⁶⁷ and Alevi,⁶⁸ whose ethnic, religious, and cultural demands were long ignored even by the parties they traditionally voted for. Erdoğan also pursued a discourse to convince Kurds and Alevi to exit their party loyalties and join the ranks of his “people” in a fight against the other of the people, that is, the military tutelage, which has a long-recorded history of blocking the rule of the people.

Table 7. Symptoms of JDP’s Populism, 2007–2011

Populism	Model #2
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66 Gareth Jenkins, “Continuity and Change: Prospects for Civil–Military Relations in Turkey”, *International Affairs* 83, no. 2 (2007): 339-355.

67 Cengiz Çandar, “The Kurdish Question: The Reasons and Fortunes of the Opening”, *Insight Turkey* 11, no. 4 (2009): 16.

68 Bayram Ali Soner and Şule Toktaş, “Alevi and Alevism in the Changing Context of Turkish Politics: The Justice and Development Party’s Alevi Opening”, *Turkish Studies* 12, no. 3 (2011): 419-434.

Crisis	The alleged coup plots of Ergenekon and Sledgehammer
Unmet Demand	Civilianization of politics
Common Symbols	Reform and democracy
The People	Victims of previous military regimes in Turkey; ethnic and religious minorities; Kurds and Alevis, who also suffered from the operations of the deeper establishment
The Others	Deeper establishment under tutelage of the army

To remove this blockade, Erdoğan wanted to amend the Constitution to limit the military's role in politics. Short of a qualified majority in the parliament to make a constitutional amendment, Erdoğan took it to a popular referendum in 2010 on the anniversary of the military coup on September 12, which had instigated the latest military regime in Turkey.⁶⁹ With a desire to consolidate democracy in Turkey, the liberal left also supported the amendments with the expectation of larger-scale political liberalization, as summarized in their slogan “not enough... but yes!”⁷⁰ Hence, Erdoğan's discursive construction of the people confidently relied on a common symbol of democratization via the de-militarization of politics. Unsurprisingly, 58 percent of participants voted in favor of the amendments. The people were then united around the common symbol of democratization. As the people still felt the gap in their level of democracy, they demanded more and therefore, were now ready to be taken to another battle to obtain the reforms not yet in the constitutional amendments. With a wider prospect of reform and democratization, Erdoğan continued his populist campaign to end the military tutelage and brought a third victory to his party with 327 seats in parliament garnering around 50 percent of the votes in June 2011 general elections.

Natives and Nationals vs. Foreign Intruders, 2011–2015

The party's third term in office was full of ups and downs as it became less inclusive and Turkish society became more polarized. The tension between opposition groups and the government became a crisis when demonstrations commenced at Gezi Park in Taksim Square in June 2013. Plans to build a shopping mall in place of the green space of the park and the subsequent excessive use of tear gas by police to quell the mostly peaceful demonstrators brought together one of the largest and most diverse

69 For an overview of the amendment package and campaign, see Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, “Kulturkampf in Turkey: The Constitutional Referendum of 12 September 2010”, *South European Society and Politics* 17, no. 1 (2012): 4-6.

70 Murat Borovali, “Turkey's ‘Liberal’ Liberals”, *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 43, no. 4-5 (2017): 407.

groups of protesters in Turkey's history.⁷¹ In response to the protestors' efforts to bring forward dissident voices to government, Erdoğan managed to consolidate his people by labeling the protestors as looters who acted on behalf of the interest rate lobbies targeting the Turkish economy.⁷² As their demands sounded elitist from the perspective of the average citizen on the street, Erdoğan again kept his majority by appealing to them as the outcasts of the system. During the protests he said: "For them, we do not understand politics, arts, theatre, cinema, poetry, painting, aesthetics, and architecture. For them, we are an illiterate, ignorant, and lower-class negro crowd, who should be content with what is given to us. They never showed any respect or understanding of our lifestyles."⁷³ As his people were convinced the protestors were not similar to them, the government eventually evicted the protestors from Gezi Park with some public support, but cancelled its plan to build a shopping mall there. The competing populisms between the people of the opposition and those of the government ended with the dissolution of the opposition's people and consolidation of the government's people.

Soon after the Gezi Park protests, another crisis erupted between the governing party and its one-time ally, the Islamist Gülenist movement. A corruption investigation against the leading members of the cabinet and prime minister was instigated by Gülenist operatives in the police force and the judiciary in December 2013.⁷⁴ As recordings of wiretapped phone calls were leaked on social media to convince the public of the authenticity of the corruption, Prime Minister Erdoğan denied the allegations, claiming the recordings were montaged and dubbed by the Gülenists. From his perspective, this was a coup attempt designed by "foreign intruders" against his legitimately elected government, which sparked a wave of purges of police officers associated with the Gülenist movement.⁷⁵

71 Yeşim Arat, "Violence, Resistance, and Gezi Park", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 4 (2013): 808; also see Antimo L. Farro and Deniz Günce Demirhisar, "The Gezi Park Movement: A Turkish Experience of the Twenty-first-century Collective Movements", *International Review of Sociology* 24, no. 1 (2014): 176-189.

72 Türkay Salim Nefes, "The Impacts of the Turkish Government's Conspiratorial Framing of the Gezi Park Protests", *Social Movement Studies* 16, no. 5 (2017): 612.

73 Recep Tayyip Erdoğan quoted in the daily Cumhuriyet, "Gezi Parkı, İşgal Alanı Değildir," *Cumhuriyet e-Gazete*, June 11, 2013, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/gezi-parki-isgal-alani-degildir-427122>.

74 Hakkı Taş, "A History of Turkey's AKP-Gülen Conflict", *Mediterranean Politics* 23, no. 3 (2018): 400.

75 Seda Demiralp, "The Breaking up of Turkey's Islamic Alliance: The AKP-Gülen Conflict and Implications for Middle East Studies", *MERIA Journal* 20, no. 1 (2016): 5.

Hit hard first by the Gezi protests and then by the corruption accusations, the governing JDP needed a strategy, as the country was moving toward a series of elections including the municipal elections on March 30; presidential elections on August 10, 2014; and parliamentary elections on June 7 and November 1, 2015. The liberal left disapproved of the government's handling of the Gezi protestors, and loyal members of the Gülenist movement began to exit the party.⁷⁶ Upon the departure of these two strands of his party's support base, Erdoğan had to re-imagine and reconstruct his people by adopting a new discourse and policy to include social groups once among "the others of the people" in his previous discourse.

In the reconstruction of the people, he first appealed to previous victims of the Gülenist movement. The generals and members of the opposition, who were once accused of planning a coup against his government, were now presented as victims of the Gülenist movement.⁷⁷ Just as in the corruption case targeting him and his ministers, the evidence against them was also manufactured by operatives of the Gülen movement in the police and judiciary. By saying so, he likely expected that larger groups in society, who feel close to the victims of Gülen, would develop sympathy for him and his party. Therefore, Erdoğan switched his discourse toward the so-called *Ergenekon* group, wanting to cooperate with them in his fight against the new enemy of the people, the Gülenists. Thus, it was no coincidence that the leading figures of Ergenekon, the alleged coup plotters, were released from prison before the local elections in March 2014.⁷⁸ Second, Erdoğan related his struggle against the Gülenists to the Kurdish opening. On several occasions, he expressed how the Gülen movement wanted to obstruct the peace negotiations between PKK and the government, a process known in Turkey as the Kurdish opening.⁷⁹ He thereby wanted to enlarge the frontier against the Gülenists by appealing to the Kurds. Third, Erdoğan appealed to the secular upper-middle classes, who believed that the internal conflict among the Islamists would eventually benefit them.⁸⁰ He thereby reunited and reimagined the people that

76 See Ömer Taşpınar, "The End of the Turkish Model", *Survival* 56, no. 2, 49-64.

77 BBC, "Turkey 'Coup Plot': PM Erdogan Favours Retrial", *BBC News*, January 6, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25617637>.

78 BBC, "Ergenekon Davasında Tahliyeler," *BBC News Türkçe*, March 10, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2014/03/140310_ergenekon_tahliye.

79 Indeed, the Gülenists had a more hard-line nationalist approach toward the Kurds. See Gönül Tol, "The Clash of Former Allies: The AKP versus the Gulen Movement", *Middle East Institute*, March 7, 2014, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/clash-former-allies-akp-versus-gulen-movement>.

80 Taş, "A history," 401.

would support him and his party despite the departure of the Gülenists and left-wing liberals.

This strategy paid off, at least in the municipal and presidential elections. Compared to the previous municipal elections, the JDP increased its support from 38.4 to 42.8 percent. Following this, Erdoğan was elected president of the Republic by garnering 51.8 percent of the votes in August 2014. The joint candidate of RPP and NAP ranked second with 38.4 percent of the votes. However, the surprise of the presidential elections was the emergence of Selahattin Demirtaş, the leader of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (PDP), with a national agenda appealing to non-Kurdish dissidents of the government in addition to its traditional Kurdish base, which granted his PDP a new record of 9.76 percent of the total votes.⁸¹

However, the rise of the pro-Kurdish PDP together with the ongoing peace negotiations between the PKK and government also led to an unexpected increase in the popularity of the ultra-nationalist NAP. Despite Erdoğan's efforts to keep his people united, they flowed toward the PDP and NAP. For the first time in its history, the parliamentary elections of 2015 did not yield what the JDP anticipated.⁸² It won only 258 seats, losing its majority in parliament by garnering 40.8 percent of the votes. The RPP ranked second, with 24.9 percent of the votes and 132 seats. NAP and PDP won 80 seats each, with 16.3 and 13.1 percent of the votes, respectively.

The election results necessitated a coalition government, and the incumbent JDP was forced to negotiate with other parties to form a coalition.⁸³ After a period of failed attempts, President Erdoğan chose not to assign the main opposition party to establish the government, and called instead for an early election in November 2015. The JDP thus created a governmental gridlock by failing to reach an agreement with another party in parliament. In addition to this political crisis, a security crisis⁸⁴ emerged just

81 Cengiz Güneş, "Turkey's Presidential Election Offers A Key Opportunity for the Kurdish Minority to Exert Pressure on the Turkish Government," *LSE European Politics and Policy Blog* (EUROPP), August 9, 2014, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/71846/>. See also Ali Çarkoğlu, "Electoral Constellations Towards the August 2014 Presidential Elections in Turkey," *International Journal of Press/Politics* 19, no. 3 (2014): 295-317.

82 Turkish voters challenged the JDP government for the first time in 13 years by ending its parliamentary majority. See Özge Kemahlioğlu, "Winds of Change? The June 2015 Parliamentary Election in Turkey," *South European Society and Politics* 20, no. 4 (2015): 445-464.

83 Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, "The Conundrum of Coalition Politics in Turkey," *Turkish Studies* 17, no. 1 (2016): 33.

84 Kalaycıoğlu, "The Conondrum," 34.

before the snap elections in November. First, peace negotiations between the PKK and government came to a bottleneck in March. This ended the ceasefire in early July.⁸⁵ Then, two suicide bombings targeting pro-Kurdish activists and protesters took place first in Suruç on July 20 and then in Ankara on October 11, killing 133 people and wounding more than 600. Committed by ISIS according to Turkish authorities, the bombings spread fear and terror among the PDP's support base, whose leadership accused the government for the attacks and canceled all election rallies.⁸⁶ The situation worsened when the militant branch of the PKK started a new strategy⁸⁷ by engaging in an urban warfare with the state, particularly in Diyarbakır in September 2015.⁸⁸ Consequently, a security crisis suddenly emerged on top of the coalition crisis in politics as Turkey moved toward an early election.

Again, the conditions were ripe for the incumbent JDP to implement a populist strategy in the Laclauian sense as Table 8 shows. First, there was accumulated frustration among several segments of society as a result of a series of scandalous events including the mass anti-government demonstrations of Gezi Park, criminal investigations against some members of the cabinet and the prime minister, and the ISIS attacks on the Kurdish activists. This trend peaked and turned into a security crisis when peace talks between the Turkish government and PKK were halted and the ceasefire was broken just before the elections. This new crisis gave JDP leader Erdoğan the opportunity to appeal to the people with reference to their unmet demands for security and stability. In this new populist discourse of securitization, the main reference made was neither to the victims of the system nor ordinary men on the street. Different from previous populist strategies of the party, the people were defined as natives and nationals (*yerli ve milli*). Erdoğan wanted to re-unite his people as opposed to the attempts of foreign intruders to tear them into pieces. He began to refer to Gezi pro-

85 Although I emphasize domestic and electoral factors, the changing context in the Middle East also played a role in the failure of peace talks. See Cengiz Özkahraman, "Failure of Peace Talks between Turkey and the PKK: Victim of Traditional Turkish Policy or of Geopolitical Shifts in the Middle East?" , *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 4, no. 1 (2017): 50-66.

86 BBC, "Ankara Explosions Leave Almost 100 Dead-Officials," *BBC News*, October 10, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34495161>.

87 Bese Hozat "Yeni Süreç, Devrimci Halk Savaşı Sürecidir," *Özgür Gündem*, July 14, 2015, <http://www.ozgur-gundem.com/yazi/133642/yeni-surec-devrimci-halk-savasi-surecidir>. See also Şener Aktürk, "Why did the PKK declare Revolutionary People's War in July 2015?" , October 14, 2016, *Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS)*, <https://pomeps.org/why-did-the-pkk-declare-revolutionary-peoples-war-in-july-2015>.

88 Faruk Balıkcı, "Sur'da Neler Yaşandı?" , November 29, 2017, *Gazete Duvar*, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/gundem/2017/11/29/surda-neler-yasandi>.

testers, Gülenists, and PDP supporters as non-native, foreign intruders who wished to dismantle the integrity of the nation with the state. To remedy the attacks of these enemies of the people, he reconstructed the people with reference to the common symbols of religion and nationalism formulated as the four pillars of his *rabia*: “one nation, one flag, one homeland, one state.”⁸⁹ He thereby established a new antagonism, this time between the nationals and non-nationals and excluded some segments of society to keep his people intact. The natives and nationals would remain loyal to his party and the state, whereas the others “in search of another state could go wherever they like,” as Erdoğan explained via a visual message on Twitter.⁹⁰

This revised populist strategy of the government paid off well again, and the JDP ranked first in the November 2015 elections by garnering 49.5 percent of the votes and 317 seats in parliament. This meant that the JDP increased its vote share by 8.6 percent and won an additional 59 seats in parliament compared to the June 2015 elections. RPP preserved its position as the main opposition with a marginal increase of 0.4 percent of votes and only an additional two seats in parliament. Evidently, the government’s new populist rhetoric was over-emphasizing security and nativism, creating a flow from Turkish and Kurdish nationalism toward the JDP.⁹¹ In comparison to the June elections, the Turkish nationalist NAP lost 40 seats with a 4.4 percent decrease in electoral support, whereas PDP lost 21 seats due to a 2.36 percent drop. In short, the new populist discourse of securitization and nativism was influential in convincing some Turkish nationalists and some moderate, conservative Kurds to shift their electoral preference and join the ranks of Erdoğan’s people within a short period between June and November.

Table 8. Symptoms of JDP’s Populism, 2011–2015

Populism	Model #3
Crisis	Mass anti-government demonstrations, corruption allegations, government gridlock and terrorist attacks in Suruç and Ankara

89 Sabah, “Sculpture on President Erdoğan’s desk says: One Nation, One Flag, One Homeland, One State”, *Daily Sabah*, November 10, 2015, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2015/11/10/sculpture-on-president-erdogans-desk-says-one-nation-one-flag-one-homeland-one-state>.

90 Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, “Tek Millet, Tek Bayrak, Tek Vatan, Tek Devlet”, March 11, 2019, <https://twitter.com/rterdogan/status/1105007951109148672?s=21>.

91 Sabri Sayarı, “Back to a Predominant Party System: the November 2015 Snap Election in Turkey”, *South European Society and Politics* 21, no. 2 (2016): 275.

Unmet Demand	Security and stability
Common Symbols	Religious and nationalist symbols formulated as Rabia
The People	The natives and the nationals
The Others	The foreign intruders: Gezi protestors and the Gülenists, PKK insurgency

It's a Matter of State's Survival: JDP's Pro-Systemic Populism, 2016-2023

The most recent crisis in Turkey took place when some army officers mostly associated with the Gülen movement (FETÖ) attempted to overthrow the government by a coup on June 15, 2016. Upon the failure of the attempted coup, the government declared a state of emergency, allowing single-handed administration of the country with fewer checks and balances.⁹² Emphasizing the preservation of the state, Erdoğan and his party resorted to a statist position⁹³ by abandoning their previous populist arguments. Through this discourse, Erdoğan and his team drafted “the presidential system,” further strengthening the president and weakening the parliament, and confirming this new centrist and statist system by the people via a referendum in April 2017.⁹⁴ His new discourse relied on an antagonism between “the state” and “the enemies of the state”. He successfully appealed to the deeply embedded ontological insecurity among the average citizens, which dates back to times of Balkan Wars (1912-13), World War One (1914-18) and War of Liberation (1919-22)⁹⁵. With a discourse of defending the land and the state, Erdoğan once again managed to reunite the common man; and won the presidential elections in the first round, with 52.5 percent of the votes in June 2018. His party, however, lost the majority in the parliament with 295 seats and 42.5 percent of the votes. The party now had to rely on a *de facto* coalition with the ultranationalist NAP. As a result, subsequent to the elections, Erdoğan continued this newly emerged centrist and statist position in order to ensure the NAP support to his government.

92 Özlem Kaygusuz, “Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Regime Security in Turkey: Moving to an ‘Exceptional State’ under AKP”, *South European Society and Politics* 23, no. 2 (2018): 296.

93 Joost Jongerden, “Conquering the State and Subordinating Society under AKP Rule: A Kurdish Perspective on the Development of a New Autocracy in Turkey”, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 21, no. 3 (2019): 264-265.

94 See Berk Esen and Şebnem Gümüştü, “A Small Yes for Presidentialism: The Turkish Constitutional Referendum of April 2017”, *South European Society and Politics* 22, no. 3 (2017): 303-326.

95 See Ryan John Matthews, “Sevres Syndrome: Constructing the Populist Us versus Them through Fear in Turkey” (PhD diss., Virginia Technology University, 2021).

This new discourse also awoke some resentment among the leading figures of his party. At some stage, many observers thought that the notion of “the people” he constructed through a struggle against the elite and establishment was being shattered. The economic hardship also contributed to the impression that the mirror Erdoğan had been holding to reflect a complete image of the people’s self was cracking. Failure of the state institutions to respond rapidly to the most devastating earthquake in Turkey’s recent history also contributed to the process. Of course, this might have been a potential crisis for the ruling party but an opportunity for opposition parties. However, an alternative leader who may reconstruct the people of the opposition by offering the recently unattached supporters of the JDP with an all-inclusive discourse was long missing. It was too late and too little when the opposition agreed on RPP Chairman Kılıçdaroğlu’s candidacy. He became a controversial name, which divided the opposition rather than uniting them. As a result, he failed to reconstruct the people of the opposition by advocating their unmet demands for economic welfare and prosperity and democratization of the system.

Instead, Erdoğan managed to turn this incident into a crisis of the opposition. Accusing the opposition of collaborating with the political wing of the terrorist PKK, Erdoğan succeeded in dispersing the people of the opposition, and made them feel alienated and separated from each other. Through a statist-populist discourse⁹⁶, as shown in Table 9 below, Erdoğan once again appealed to “the people” who were concerned about the preservation of national unity with a discourse of national and religious symbols including the re-conversion of Hagia Sophia, newly found natural gas resources, and national defense industry. He invited “the true people” of Turkey to vote against the leadership of the opposition, who in his discourse collaborated with the political extension of PKK terrorism. This strategy worked yet again and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan won the presidential elections with 52.18 percent of the votes in the second round, in May 2023. This, however, brought a limited victory in the parliamentary elections as the party could only win 268 seats by garnering 35.6 percent of the votes. This emboldened the government’s reliance on the NAP support, who won 50 seats in the parliament with around 10 percent of the votes.

Table 9. Symptoms of JDP’s Statist Populism, 2016-2023

Populism	Model #3
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96 See Brent J. Steele and Alexandra Homolar, “Ontological Insecurities and the Politics of Contemporary Populism”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no: 3, (2019): 214-221.

Crisis	The stalemate of the opposition in bringing together a majority by getting support from the Green-Left at the cost of creating a nationalist reaction.
Unmet Demand	To become a whole, to preserve the idea of national unity.
Common Symbols	Symbols of national and religious pride including the re-conversion of Hagia Sophia, newly found natural gas resources, and national defense industry.
The People	Natives and nationalists.
The Others	The leadership of the opposition, who seek support from PKK and its political wing Green-Left.

Conclusion

Religious conservative parties in Turkey succeeded not only in establishing and enlarging a support base, but also in presenting their supporters as the totality of the people. Through a symptomatic-psychoanalytical reading of the discourse articulated by Islamist party leaders, this paper claimed that economic, political, or cultural crises played a significant role in the electoral success of Islamist parties, whose leaders managed to unite the victims and transform them into their people with reference to common symbols, deprivations, and enemies. Despite the continuity in this populist strategy, this paper also showed that Islamist parties followed different models of populism and varied in terms of the kind of crises and victims they appealed to. While Erbakan of the 1970s and 1980s pursued a populist strategy appealing to the periphery, who felt economically deprived in an era of economic transition and crisis (populism model #1), Erdoğan followed a populist rhetoric focusing on the political and economic unmet demands of the ordinary man during his campaigns between 2001 and 2011 (populism model #2). Shifting his populist discourse toward a more religious and nationalist one formulated as *Rabia*, Erdoğan began relying more on the natives and nationals (*yerli ve milli*), targeting the opposition as foreign intruders (*dış mihrak*) during and after the 2015 general elections (populism model #3).

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