

SOCIAL POLICY APPROACHES OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES IN TURKEY

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ABSTRACT

The political parties of Turkey have different attitudes towards some issues such as secularism, laicism, governmental system, constitution. Social policy has been a peripheral issue. However, the ideological stances of the parties should be crystallised through their stances regarding social policy. This paper pointed out the social policy orientations of the political parties represented in the parliament following the 2007 elections. The party programs and elections manifestos of the parties were the primary focus of attention in the study. The political dimension was central in the discussion of social policy since political parties are the major actors in its implementation. However, their ideological standpoints have been disregarded in the current debates, and only some practices are referred to. To overcome such a drawback, this study elaborated on the issue in a more comprehensive and theoretical manner.

Keywords: political parties, social policy, welfare politics, Turkish politics, Turkey

INTRODUCTION

This research will evaluate social policy orientations in association with five political parties represented in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (TBMM) following the 2007 General Elections. Whereas the Justice and Development Party (AKP) is the governing party, Republican People's Party (CHP), Nationalist Action Party (MHP), Democratic Left Party (DSP) and the Democratic Society Party (DTP) are the opposition parties in the parliament. This research concentrates on the period prior to the 2008-12 global financial crisis, which affected the global social policy environment. In this respect, other studies can easily depict the change within Turkish political parties' social policy approaches.

While attempting to sort out the basics and general perspectives of these political parties concerning social policy and the welfare state, I opt for some significant fields to exemplify their perspectives that have very broad sub-fields actually. The fields that I will derive my concrete illustrations are education and health in the first place and labour issues in the second place. To put it in another way, I omit other sub-fields such as social security and insurance, women and family, housing and accommodation, sports and youth because such a broad subject matter passes over the boundaries of this research. This research is limited to arguing for the basics and general perspectives of the political parties in their social policy proposals. For example, studying a subject like social security is on its own a massive field of research, and it is a fact that articulating this kind of crucial and vast subject might lead to the deviation of the major problem to be investigated, i.e. general social policy perspectives.

As long as the perspectives of political parties are analysed in a comparative manner, the studies of social policy would continue to remain incomplete or insufficient since the parties are the major practitioners that have the authority to put the policies into practice. Although the parties

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Submission: 09.10.2018

Acceptance: 20.12.2018

that are the significant actors of the political system do not formulate their policies by relying on the opinions and decisions of their members and consequently leading to a vast gap between the political base and macro policies, the party programs and electoral manifestos usually reflect the global trends and approaches in the supra-national scale.

At this point, I would like to share the basic result of my research in the first instance. Among the political parties that I examined, the AKP was the most prominent one reflecting the global trends clearly. Not being as clear as the AKP, but the CHP was also concerned with these trends. The MHP represented a problematic situation since the party program and the 2007 electoral manifesto imply two different approaches. The DSP seemed to be holding to a classical position of social-democratic perspective regarding social policy. The DTP opted for promoting Kurdish identity through social policy.

An analysis via social policy would also mean that it is an analysis of Turkish political life. The political elite and the elitist circles in general usually disregard the importance of social policy issues. Besides that, the very attitude is prevalent in academia aiming at the analysis of Turkish politics. For example, the number of academic articles in which social policy is treated as one of the significant parameters of both politics and its analysis is very limited. At this point, it would be helpful to draw attention to Ziya Öniş, a Turkish scholar. In this research, similar to that of Öniş (1997, 1998), neoliberalism, the new right, and globalisation present a convenient analysis framework. Parallel to these, the concept of governance in a neo-liberal sense is evaluated in this research.

Öniş (1997), in his article, which is making an account of the political economy for the rise of political Islam, basically deals with the Welfare Party (RP). Besides that, in my opinion, the viewpoint of Öniş sheds light on the rise of today's AKP in understanding its roots. To put it briefly, it is emphasised that the process of intense globalisation of the world economy has worsened income and welfare inequalities and possibilities of distribution in the scale of nation-states. Departing from this point, it is evident that the declines of the radius of action for the nation-states and their abilities together with the failure of social democratic movements and political parties in meeting the needs of the needy (poor people, disadvantaged and excluded segments of society) have resulted in a vacuum in the political sphere. This political vacuum paved the ground for the fundamental Islamist and extreme nationalist far-right movements to proliferate (Öniş, 1997, p. 746). It is not, of course, the only reason for the rise of political Islam, but it is one of the most critical factors. As a result of the neoliberal economic order, with the rising inequalities, a mass movement emerged or "exodus" from the rural to the peripheries of the metropolitan cities in Turkey. In his other article Öniş (1998, p. 339) argues that both labour and agricultural producers were the two losers of the structural adjustment process initiated with the 24th January 1980 decisions. The structural adjustment to the neo-liberal economic order led to this exodus. The inability and lack of macro-scale social democratic policies to cope with these people's problems and meet their needs showed that the political Islamists were more responsive to these issues with their micro-scale social aid programs relying on their religious networks. This was the primary reason for the increase in the electoral base of political Islam.

By looking at the level of local governments, especially at the metropolitan level, the reflections of the situation mentioned above can easily be depicted. For example, in 1994 local elections, the RP could achieve to take most of the municipalities of the metropolises with the 22% average of votes, and its success in distributing the micro-scale social aids to the poor segments of society living in shantytowns with the help of their local governments led to the increase in its votes in 1999. The RP became the first party in metropolitan cities with 23% of average in

1999. When we come to the 2004 local elections, it is seen that the AKP having similar roots with the RP, managed to increase the votes up to 46%.

AKP: TOWARDS “GOVERNANCE”

After discussing the repercussions of global trends and structural adjustment in Turkey, I would prefer to continue evaluating the political parties’ social policies in light of their party programs and electoral manifestos. The introductory section of the social policy party program of Justice and Development Party starts with outlining their general view of social policy. The programs of CHP and MHP lack such an introduction of their social policy perspectives in general. AKP notes that their conception of social policy is not aimed at providing welfare for a specific group or class but the whole society. The AKP program having frequent references to the welfare state (in Turkish, the term “sosyal devlet” meaning “social state,” is used), explicitly reflects the global trends of neoliberal hegemony. For example, by stating that “Our party will increase efficiency, speed and resource capacity in social state services by ensuring that the central government cooperates with local governments, non-governmental organisations and the private sector” (p. 27), they seemed to be articulating the neoliberal conception of “efficiency in public sector” to their discourse. In addition to this, it is understood that the insistence of neoliberalism on “governance” is incorporated with the perspective presented in the AKP program.

For Gerry Stoker (2000, p. 3), this term implies “a concern with governing, achieving collective action in the realm of public affairs, in conditions where it is not possible to rest on recourse to the authority of the state.” This definition gives us the idea that governance is highly related to governing but not using the state authority, and secondly, it is a way of collective action. Before focusing on its reflection on actual life, it would be appropriate to continue with Stoker’s (2000, p. 3) vision:

Governance involves working across boundaries within the public sector or between the public sector and private or voluntary sectors. It focuses attention on a set of actors that are drawn from but also beyond the formal institutions of government. A key concern is processes of networking and partnership. Governance recognises the capacity to get things done which does not rest on the power of government to command or use its authority. Governing becomes an interactive process because no single actor has the knowledge and resource capacity to tackle problems unilaterally.

The passage above involves most of the terms that are key to governance. These are “public-private-voluntary sectors, networking, partnership, interaction”. These terms have much to do with the trend that the discipline of public administration faces from the 1970s. The combination of these terms resulted in a shift from governing to governance. Drawing attention to the causatives that gave rise to this shift would help us catch the rolling train of governance (Konuralp, 2017). For Tarık Şengül (2001), welfare state practices in the West regressed, and in place of this, there emerged some market mechanisms with the rise of the new right, and nation-states started to be abraded with the search for increasing the mobility of capital in the global scale. The privatisation process could be accounted for the very same logic. The areas that were abandoned by the state started to be filled by the private sector. However, state-market distinction proved to be insufficient in itself, and a third sector was transformed in local governments. In this framework, a tripartite model came to the fore with the combination of local state, local capital and civil societal institutions. Since the local government notion could not embrace such a formation, this new genesis was entitled “governance” (Şengül, 2001, p. 52).

Like Şengül, Bob Jessop (2000) argues for the failure of state-market separation, and he defines the process as “market failure”. Hence, governance was a response to this failure in the form of public-private partnerships. Bob Jessop (2000, p.11) points out that

The 1970s saw growing assertions that state intervention was failing and that the state itself was in crisis. In the UK in the 1980s, the dominant neo-liberal response to this alleged crisis largely involved turning to the market and, to a lesser extent, to community or family self-help. The Thatcher and Major governments promoted privatisation, liberalisation, de-regulation, the use of market proxies in the residual state sector, cuts in direct taxes to enhance consumer choice, and internationalisation to promote capital mobility and the transfer of technology and ‘know-how’. They also advocated an enterprise culture and popular capitalism to make civil society more market-friendly.

This project was intended to re-equip the UK with a liberal, “nightwatchman” state with progressively smaller and more balanced budgets thereby boosting this slimmed-down state’s capacity to perform its remaining core functions. However, while this neo-liberal programme was still being pursued and, indeed, intensified, it also became apparent that the turn to the market had not delivered all that had been promised. Market failures and inadequacies had not been eliminated, yet an explicit return to the state was ideologically and politically unacceptable. Thus, as early as the 1980s, one could discern increasing government interest at all levels in how public-private partnerships and similar forms of governance might contribute to public policy and purposes.

Jessop’s issues above make it clear that the rhetoric of the new-right concerning minimal and non-intervening state was crashed into the ground. As the form of intervention changed, the compelling argument of liberal ideology has lost its persuasiveness. Market-rationality and socio-economic conditions may not match and cause disorder and crisis. To avoid such a situation, governance has been seen as a remedy with a neoliberal make-up. However, I should also note that the process after the 2008 crisis showed that neoliberal context adheres to state intervention as a remedy to the finance capital.

Painter and Goodwin (2000) raise another approach to the shift from local government to governance. While scholars such as Jessop and Şengül put the emphasis on “marketisation”, Painter and Goodwin use the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism as an analytical tool. They write that

Under Fordism, for a period, the provision of social welfare was functional for economic growth and development, and also brought a degree of social cohesion and stability. Under post-Fordism, international economic competitiveness would be paramount, and social policy would be subordinated to supply-side requirements, particularly the need to provide a flexible labour force with training matched to the requirements of private investors. In consequence, new forms of coordination between the public and private sectors (governance) would be required both to maintain the subordination of social need to economic competitiveness politically, and to ensure that supply-side provision was indeed tailored to the needs of the private sector. Welfare policy becomes decoupled from economic development and increasingly a mechanism for mitigating the social consequences of the restless search for competitive advantage. As it is no longer central to the mode of growth, welfare need no longer be provided or underwritten by the state, and new forms of coordination (‘governance’ again) can be introduced here too. (Painter and Goodwin, 2000, p. 42)

The trend towards post-Fordism undermines the existing welfare state model as the relations of production change. This trend represents the decline of the working class and its conventional gains. The declines in Fordism-mass production, the working class, welfare state, nation-state and the rise of post-Fordism, globalisation of capital, localisation and governance are two phases of the same token. In this sense, civil society, governance and the wave of neoliberalism have commonalities. For example, while neoliberalism argues for the withdrawal of the state

from the sphere of social policy and minimisation of it, there is an acclamation that the civil society would realise this through adding it to the decision making process with governance. Consequently, civil society forms one of the three branches of “power” together with the public and private sectors. The projection of this on a local scale is local government, private and civil sectors partnership. There are clear examples of this approach in the AKP Program, especially in the sub-sections of social policy such as education, health, culture-arts. For example, it is written that the provincial units of the central administration would provide services in primary education (p. 28) and health system, which would be integrated into the new system as well (p. 31).

Moreover, in addition to increasing decentralisation, with devolution of authority to the local governments, the articulation and contribution private sector and civil society to the process is supported. It is noted that the provision of health services is open to the contribution of voluntary and private sectors, and cooperation in this field is emphasised (pp. 30-31). Following this line of thought, the AKP explains its attitude towards education as such:

To encourage the private sector to make education investments, private education institutions will be expanded, and arrangements will be made to ensure that existing schools operate at 100 per cent capacity. Based on success criteria, the government will purchase services to ensure that the children of families whose financial situation is not good can also attend private schools. By creating demand, it will ensure that the private sector allocates resources for education investments. (p. 28)

Regarding education service, the AKP proposes the only provision of elementary education free of charge (p. 28). In higher education, the aim is to provide the needy with credit and scholarships (p. 29). This shows that the AKP paradigm of social policy is not universalistic, which would encompass the whole nation without any limitation.

Regarding labour issues, the AKP seems to defend the interests of the employers. In other words, the AKP is adherent of employers. For example, the AKP states in the party program that to reduce labour costs, they would rely on enacting new laws (p. 33). Another example is their promise to re-regulate the job security (*iş güvencesi*) enacted by the previous DSP government, according to the demands of the employers (p. 34). Actually, job security is one of the initial issues that the AKP dealt with and made the law useless for the labour. Among labour issues, entitling the public employees with the right to collective bargaining and strike is another crucial point. Despite there being a promise in the party program, the AKP governments did nothing concerning this. The number of such kinds of examples would be increased, but in my opinion, they are sufficient for me to argue to what extent the AKP is devoted to the neoliberal order. Moreover, in the 2007 Electoral Manifesto of the AKP, there are significant implications for novel neoliberal openings in employment issues by introducing further steps to maintain a flexible employment order (p. 21).

CHP: A “NEW LEFT”?

The Republican People’s Party oriented itself towards the left-of-centre in the 1960s under the leadership of Bülent Ecevit (1925-2006), who founded the DSP in the process following the 1980 military coup (Zengin, 2017). However, its program lacks an introduction of a general paradigm in social policy and welfare state issues. It directly starts with sub-sections like education and health. Seeing education on the bases of equality of opportunity and human rights, the CHP emphasises that elementary education would be free for all, as the AKP. Regarding free higher education, the CHP Program does not include any promises. In higher education, it supports a credit system like the AKP. According to Ayşe Ayata and Sencer Ayata

(2001), following the re-opening of the party in the early 1990s, the CHP began to argue for a “new left”, emphasising increased integration with the world economy. “In the CHP manifestos, income redistribution and social welfare-oriented policies have gradually receded into the background” (Ayata and Ayata, 2001, p. 103). Besides that, similar to the AKP, the program reflects the global trends ascribed to neoliberalism. For example, it is stated that the CHP would encourage the private sector in education and health. Another example is putting forward a decentralised perspective in education. The program writes that:

The CHP will save the Ministry of National Education from an excessively centralised and interventionist structure. While the National Education organisation is being restructured, the central government will be downsized. In parallel with the decentralised administration reform to be implemented gradually, local governments will provide education services. While local governments undertake the administration of certain education of their own regions after a particular stage, it will be aimed that central administrations fulfil the target-setting, balancing and supervisory functions. (CHP, 2004, p. 157)

While defending decentralisation to this extent in its party program, the CHP opposes all of the steps that the AKP government would take with the excuse of damaging the national unity of Turkey. In addition, the party program is at the same level as the AKP in reflecting the global trends, whereas the 2007 Electoral Manifesto of the CHP defends a contrary perspective. In the manifesto, the statements that are contradicting with the program attract attention. To illustrate, it is stated that:

We will carry out a public administration reform in line with Turkey’s needs. The existing localisation project under the guise of a contemporary local government model -imposing the creation of many local power centres in the name of globalisation and initiating militant staffing-threatens the unitary structure, will be liquidated entirely since it envisages administrative federalism, which tries to develop the axis of community/sect/firm and multinational companies as a rival to the central state organised on the axis of national interest.

The CHP (2004) Program is much more liberal, pluralist and reflects global trends compared to the 2007 manifesto concerning education. The program mentions that a more pluralist and competitive model would replace the state’s monopoly over education. In the manifesto, on the contrary, there is an emphasis on raising a “youth of Atatürk” loyal to his principles and reforms and internalised secular and democratic-republican values.

Promising the provision of health services to all poor people free of charge, the CHP (2004) Program aims at a health reform to make health institutions more democratic, autonomous and local. As in the case of education, the centralised structure of public health services is criticised, and the need for localisation and decentralisation is emphasised. These ideas are totally contradicting the manifesto.

Concerning labour issues, the program promises collective bargaining and the right to strike for the public employees, but most of the goals, such as unemployment insurance and job security, were realised by the DSP government. In this sense, the program needs to update its goals. The employment section of the 2007 manifesto starts with Bülent Ecevit’s famous motto: “Labour is the supreme value.” However, it attracts attention that the goal of legalising the right to strike for grievance settlement (*hak grevi*) is omitted from the manifesto, although it is in the party program. It is stated in the manifesto that “We will not see workers and employers as separate poles, but as parties aiming to increase production and seeking their rights within the framework of the law; we will aim for social peace.”

MHP: NATIONALIST AND SOCIAL AUTHORITARIAN

In the party program of the Nationalist Action Party, as in the CHP, there is not an introduction to the paradigm of social policy. In the section on social policy, there are nationalist and moral values. For example, MHP wants to end education in foreign languages, promote the honour and consciousness of being a member of the Turkish nation, and raise faithful generations. The program of MHP represents the social authoritarian values. In the political party programs that I examined, there are emphases on the cultural diversity of Turkey; however, the MHP program does not have such an attitude in the social policy section. Moreover, while other parties put forward solutions for the uneven development and gaps between regions, the MHP program has no reference to this issue. In the 2007 electoral manifesto of MHP, there is a note that “Public-private sector cooperation will be developed to reduce interregional development disparities and activate local production potential” (p. 43). As it is seen here, there is an outlook of governance.

Whereas referring to equality of conditions and opportunities, the MHP program does not mention the provision of education for free. There is no issue of localisation of education in its agenda, but it has a minor conception of supporting local governments and their collaboration with the private and voluntary sectors only in some vocational education courses. In this sense, there is a limited understanding of governance. Like AKP and CHP, MHP wants to rely on a credit and scholarship system in the higher education.

In the provision of social aids, there is a reference to the limited conception of governance as well. It is stated that “In cooperation with the central administration, in order to deliver social assistance to the poor more effectively; the activities of local governments, private sector and non-governmental organisations will be encouraged.”

The MHP electoral manifesto has a more positive attitude towards global trends of neoliberalism when compared to the party program. For example, concerning employment issues, they propose putting into practice flexible employment methods and increasing the number of private bureaus of employment.

DSP: A CLASSICAL SOCIAL-DEMOCRATIC PERSPECTIVE

The party program of the Democratic Left Party accommodates a more classical social-democratic macro perspective, reflecting the 1976 program of CHP to a large extent. In other words, the DSP seems to internalise a more traditional leftist attitude compared to today’s CHP. The global trends are either disregarded or consciously rejected, although the party updated its program in 2004. Rather than seeing social policy as a distinct section in its program, the DSP opts for putting it in the core of the “order” that it wants to establish. This order is described as a just and humanistic order in which democracy is realised with its all dimensions. Having a substantive conception of democracy with its economic, social, political and cultural dimensions, the DSP formed its six essential principles, such as freedom and independence, justice and equality, democracy, even development and welfare, solidarity and peace, healthy and secure life, in the light of a macro social paradigm. The party identifies itself with the Democratic Left movement starting in the 1960s when Ecevit was the minister of labour and gave the workers the right to strike and collective bargaining. In this sense, labour issues are at the centre of its political agenda.

The program that it would pursue when it becomes a government party is prepared with the contribution of representatives of societal groups. In other words, the electoral manifesto is made through a participatory process. To realise such a goal, firstly, the DSP summoned a

Labour Congress with the participation of the chairpersons of all labour and employer confederations, namely, Türk-iş, DİSK, Hak-İş, KESK, Kamu-Sen, Memur-Sen, BASK and TİSK. The manifesto of the Labour Congress is prepared by reaching a consensus among trade union and civil society representatives, participant academicians and party representatives. The DSP declared that it would practice this labour manifesto to realise social justice in wealth (meaning welfare). This conceptualisation of “social justice in wealth” involves giving weight to policies of social justice while at the same time increasing production and providing employment.

DTP: SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC-ETHNIC NATIONALIST

The Democratic Society Party has social-democratic credentials in its social policy section. It does not seem to be influenced by global trends very much. The point that should be mentioned about his political party’s social policy perspective is that the Kurdish identity is referred to while the social policy is proposed to give premium to this ethnic identity.

However, despite the regional basis of the party, which is usually supported in the eastern and southeastern part of Anatolia, the DTP does not refer to the process of governance or decentralisation concerning the provision of social services such as education and health. This might be due to being aware of the fact that the process of decentralisation would mean increased unevenness in development. In other words, the gap between the west and the east of Turkey would broaden. In this sense, the party aims at coping with this dilemma by adhering to a macro social-democratic perspective.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I mainly focused on the social policies of the political parties. I examined how influential social policy issues are within their discourses. The AKP and CHP programs are compared based on the impacts of global trends of neoliberalism. It is underlined that both party programs reflect these trends, while the CHP contradicts this attitude in its last manifesto. This point is crucial because the party programs have to be at the core of their discourses, and none of the proposals should undermine the principles of the program, but as in the case of CHP, the political parties may not have respect for their own statutes. On the side of DSP, there seems to be a new opening in the sense of labour, employment, social policy and welfare issues with a participatory process led by the party through taking the social actors into the policy and program making. However, there is the risk of confronting problems while resisting to new demands of the new global economic order to which Turkey is related.

The policy alternatives should consider this situation. The MHP seems to be in the process of locating itself in the “centre” of the political spectrum. This implication is evident when we compare electoral manifesto and party program. The MHP tries to avoid far-right elements of its discourse with its manifesto, while the DTP program involves an emphasis on cultural diversity, especially reference to Kurdish identity. In the social policy section, the emphasis is clear as well.

The research on the political parties’ social policy perspectives and discourses has shown that the political parties were approaching the centre. This prevented the parties to identify their substantial differences. These differences are minor regarding economic policies. The differences were more evident in other fields, such as relations with different cultures. Especially the left parties seemed to be in an identity crisis in asserting their distinctiveness and hegemony projects.

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