

TRACING THE PRAGMATIC NATURE OF JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT PARTY (AKP) BACK TO ITS PARTY PROGRAM *

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Abstract

This article examines the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP) and argues that the party's strategic adaptability is not incidental but intrinsic to its political identity. While the AKP has its roots in political Islam, it has consistently recalibrated its discourse and policies to maintain and consolidate power. By analyzing the party's program and juxtaposing it with its policy record in key areas such as fundamental rights, economy, education and gender, this study demonstrates that pragmatism is embedded in both the party's founding vision and its long-term governance approach. The article defines pragmatism as a political orientation that prioritizes outcomes over ideological coherence and views the AKP's shifts, ranging from EU-aligned reformism to competitive authoritarianism, not as ideological inconsistencies but as expressions of a flexible, interest-driven strategy. Finally, the study highlights how the AKP has instrumentalized both Islamist and secular-democratic narratives, reconfiguring them in response to changing political contexts.

Keywords: Turkish politics, Party programs, Justice and Development Party (AKP), Political pragmatism, Political Islam, Authoritarianization

Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi'nin (AKP) Pragmatik Doğasının Parti Programında İzinin Sürülmesi

Öz

Bu makale Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi'ni (AKP) incelemekte ve partinin stratejik uyum yeteneğinin tesadüfi değil, siyasi kimliğinin temel bir parçası olduğunu öne sürmektedir. AKP'nin kökleri siyasal İslam'a dayanmasına rağmen, iktidarını sürdürmek ve pekiştirmek amacıyla söylem ve politikalarını sürekli olarak yeniden şekillendirmiştir. Partinin programı ile temel haklar, ekonomi, eğitim ve toplumsal cinsiyet gibi kilit alanlardaki politika uygulamaları karşılaştırılarak yapılan analiz, pragmatizmin hem partinin kuruluş vizyonuna hem de uzun vadeli yönetim anlayışına içkin olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Makale, pragmatizmi ideolojik tutarlılıktan ziyade sonuçlara öncelik veren bir siyasi yönelim olarak tanımlamakta ve AKP'nin Avrupa Birliği yanlısı reformculuktan rekabetçi otoriterliğe uzanan dönüşümlerini ideolojik tutarsızlıklar olarak değil, esnek ve çıkar odaklı bir stratejinin ifadeleri olarak değerlendirmektedir. Son olarak, çalışma AKP'nin hem İslamcı hem de seküler-demokratik anlatıları araçsallaştırarak, bunları değişen siyasi bağlamlara göre nasıl yeniden yapılandırıldığını ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Türkiye siyaseti, Parti programları, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP), Siyasal pragmatizm, Siyasal İslam, Otoriterleşme

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Tracing the Pragmatic Nature of Justice and Development Party (AKP) Back to its Party Program

Introduction

The Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP) has been in power for over 22 years, the longest uninterrupted government in the multi-party period of Turkish Republic. Hence, it has a very significant place in Turkish political history. Although the party has historical ties with the National Outlook movement (*Millî Görüş*)¹ and political Islam, it differentiated itself from this movement since the very beginning. When we look at the policies of the AKP, we can see many changes in its discourse and practice. Hence, as argued elsewhere, the AKP can be accepted as a pragmatic party when we look at its policies over the years (Çınar, 2018, p. 129). In parallel, this study shows the pragmatic nature of the party. In addition to discussing certain policy areas, it brings the party program into the picture. It argues that pragmatism seen in its policies has, in fact, its roots in this foundational document. Here, the term pragmatism refers to political strategy and instrumental rationality. It must be emphasized that the notion of pragmatism used in this study does not correspond to its meaning within the classical American philosophical tradition. In that tradition, shaped by thinkers such as Charles S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, truth is assessed based on the practical consequences of ideas (Dewey, 1929; James, 1907; Peirce, 1878). In contrast, this study employs pragmatism not as a normative intellectual tradition, but as a conceptual tool to describe interest-driven political orientations. Within this context, pragmatism is understood in political terms as an orientation that prioritizes political success over ideological coherence, focusing on outcomes rather than principles, and characterized by

1 National Outlook Movement (*Millî Görüş*): A political and religious movement in Turkey founded in the late 1960s by Necmettin Erbakan. It emphasizes Islamic values, moral development, and economic independence, and argues that Turkey can develop with its own human and economic power by protecting its core Islamic values and combating European imperialism. It has significantly influenced Turkish conservative politics through various parties such as the National Order Party, National Salvation Party, and later the Welfare Party, Virtue Party, Felicity Party and finally New Welfare Party, founded by Necmettin Erbakan's son, Fatih Erbakan.

flexibility and interest-oriented behavior. Accordingly, AKP's Islamism is perceived not as a fixed doctrine, but as a strategic instrument that is reinterpreted and adapted in response to changing political exigencies.

Political party programs show us how parties declare their policy priorities, ideological positions and commitments. These documents can be considered important sources to understand whether parties fulfill their promises or make changes when they come to power. The AKP's party program is called the AKP Development and Democratization Program (*AK PARTİ Kalkınma ve Demokratikleşme Programı*), which was published a few months after the party's foundation, and is still on the party's website without any changes.² Since party programs are reference points that show us how a party positions itself on the political spectrum, comparing this foundational document and actual policies of the AKP will be fruitful to understand the party better. This article looks at the AKP's party program with the aim of demonstrating that pragmatism is embedded in both the party's founding vision and its long-term governance approach.

The plan of the article is as follows. The first part of the article focuses on the nature of the AKP's pragmatism and its instrumentalization of political Islam. The second part examines some of the AKP's policies in different areas in parallel to the divisions in the party program such as fundamental rights and political principles, economy, women and family, and education. This section examines the divergence between the discourse outlined in the AKP's party program and the rhetoric and policies observed in day-to-day politics with particular attention to Erdoğan's catchphrases during the second decade of his leadership. It will be argued that pragmatism has served multiple purposes for the AKP, initially as a strategy for political survival and later as a means of enhancing its political manoeuvrability. It will also be shown how the party program itself provided ample space for such pragmatism.

1. AKP and Pragmatism in the Context of the Instrumentalization of Political Islam

Political pragmatism prioritizes political outcomes over ideological consistency. In this context, pragmatism is understood as the subordination of principled commitment in favor of the acquisition and maintenance of power,

² In addition, the party's 2023 vision document is on its website, but this does not replace the party's official program. The party program consists of AKP Development and Democratization Program, which was published in February 2002 and has not changed to this day.

with political actors developing tactical orientations based on prevailing conditions. Carl Schmitt, in defining politics, emphasizes that sovereignty is fundamentally rooted in the power to decide (Schmitt, 2005). This perspective implies that politics is inherently strategic and flexible in nature. Consequently, ideologies may lose their primacy in the face of political instrumentalism. Riker, on the other hand, explains political pragmatism in terms of the ability to engage in strategic behaviour and coalition-building asserting that calculated actions, rather than idealistic approaches, are decisive (Riker, 1986).

Religious parties in Europe and Latin America, to attract a wider electorate, have secularized their discourse, distanced themselves from religious institutions and became more pragmatic. This shift emphasizes basic freedoms to maintain appeal among religious voters. As a result, research on religious parties should focus on their ability to balance religious and secular agendas, their electoral performance, and especially their shifting, changeable nature (Yavuz, 2009, pp. 6-7). In a similar pragmatic move, the AKP followed a different political trajectory than its predecessor, the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi, RP, 1983-1998*). While the latter was anti-system, the AKP wanted to align with the system or at least it wanted to project that image (Altınordu, 2016, p. 163; Çınar, 2018, p. 135). According to Giovanni Sartori's narrow definition, an anti-system party is one that seeks to change not the government, but the very system of government itself, if possible. Its opposition is not an *opposition on issues* but an *opposition of principle*. The broad definition, on the other hand, is meant that a party can be defined as being anti-system whenever it undermines the legitimacy of the regime it opposes (Sartori, 1976, pp. 132–133). In addition, it is important to remember that the core values of a political regime and how a specific party aligns with those values are not inherently obvious or fixed. Instead, they are open to interpretation and debate. As such, the idea of a party being anti-system can be understood as a contested cultural construct, rather than an objectively measurable attribute (Altınordu, 2016, p. 153).

As mentioned above, in Turkey, the Welfare Party was seen as an anti-system and was first removed from the government after the 1997 Turkish Military Memorandum (*the February 28 process*)³, and then closed down by the Constitutional Court in 1998. Shortly before the closure of the Welfare Party, the Virtue Party (*Fazilet Partisi, FP, 1997-2001*) was established as its successor. Within this new party two groups named innovators and traditionalists emerged

3 The reason why this event is also called the February 28 process is that the decisions taken by the Turkish military leadership at the National Security Council meeting took place on February 28, 1997. This memorandum started the process that led to the resignation of Islamist prime minister Necmettin Erbakan -the leader of the Welfare Party- and the end of the coalition government.

and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was the Istanbul Provincial Chairman of the party at that time, came to the fore as the leader of the reformists. The main difference between the reformists and the traditionalists was that the reformists wanted to open the party's doors to everyone, transforming the Welfare Party into a catch-all party, defined by Kirchheimer as one that gradually moves away from representing specific social groups, leading to a decline in the party's 'ideological baggage' and the rise of party leaders as central unifying figures (Baykan, 2018, p. 172, 2023, p. 256). The reformists wanted a party with an ideological spine as opposed to traditionalists, who wanted to keep the party as a deeply ideological party (Çakır, 2005, pp. 549–551). The leading founders of the AKP were people who were among the reformists within the Virtue Party at that time. In fact, the party program of the AKP, as a manifesto, showed its desire of becoming a system party, by giving up its initial anti-system party roots and choosing to successfully integrate into the political system (Yavuz, 2009, p. 3). This might be seen as the first indication of the AKP's pragmatism. It is also important to note that the tension between the ideological rigidity and pragmatic transformation of Islamist movements gains particular significance in the case of the AKP. There are arguments suggesting that the outcome of this tension is not the AKP's abandonment of its Islamist references, but rather its repositioning as an actor that employs these references in a more strategic manner. At the core of this strategy lies the apparent moderation of Islamism, while simultaneously deploying it actively in the consolidation of power (Yavuz, 2009, pp. 9–13).

If it can be argued that Islamism is born out of the tension between ideological and pragmatic concerns (Guida, 2018, p. 1), then it can be said that the AKP's Islamism has also been shaped as a result of this tension. The AKP's Islamism, which was not vocally expressed during the party's foundation and the first years of its rule, has been shaped by pragmatism, especially after the party consolidated its power. In line with this perspective, the AKP's adoption of a moderate Islamic discourse can be interpreted not as a genuine ideological transformation, but as a means to forge alliances with the business class and secure political legitimacy. Accordingly, the liberalization of political Islam in Turkey can be explained not through an internal evolution of Islamism, but through a strategic adaptation dictated by circumstances and interests (Tuğal, 2009, pp. 244–245). While drawing on Islamist references, the AKP has, at various times, aligned itself with nationalism or liberal democracy, moves that reflect not a commitment to a stable ideological foundation, but actions guided by utility. The AKP recognized that to shape Turkey's future, they needed to redefine their stance on Islam by acknowledging the semi-secular nature of the Republic and abandoning the more radical goals of Islamism, such as establishing a global Islamic order. Although the party's founders were rooted in political Islam, their experience in local government since the 1990s fostered a

pragmatist approach, aligning them more with Özal's Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi, ANAP, 1983-2009*) than with Erbakan's ideological vision. Their global perspective, use of Islam as a source of inspiration rather than a political aim, and alignment with Turkey's conservative economic liberalism appealed to a broad range of right-wing supporters and even some liberal voices on the left (Öktem, 2011, p. 128).

In parallel, there is no reference to Islamism in the party program. Instead, Erdoğan declared the AKP's ideology as *conservative democracy* just after its establishment (Mynet Haber, 2002).⁴ While this may be regarded as the ideological spine of the party, it is important to note that some of its founding members have stated that the party was not originally established as a conservative democratic entity (Hürriyet, 2013). Yet, the concept of conservative democracy is discussed as the ideological identity of the AKP in the work of Yalçın Akdoğan (who can be seen as one of the organic intellectuals of the party) entitled *The AKP and Conservative Democracy* (Akdoğan, 2004, p. vii). Such a statement was the party leadership's most important move towards defining a mainstream political identity for the AKP (Altınordu, 2016, p. 17). Although the party leadership often describes itself as conservative democratic in public discourse, the total omission of the term conservative from its official program suggests a pragmatic approach to political positioning.

In addition, in the early years of the AKP rule, the EU support played a key role in Turkey's democratic and economic reforms. In response, AKP leaders adopted a pragmatic approach, actively supporting Europeanization and avoiding overtly religious issues. While Islamic goals were not abandoned, they were temporarily set aside in favour of more practical priorities (Yavuz, 2009, pp. 8–9). This pro-European Union, democratization, and human rights-centred rhetoric adopted by the AKP in its early years can be interpreted as a tactical strategy developed to gain legitimacy both in the eyes of the domestic public and international actors. Jenny White argues that Muslim nationalist discourse often involves a pragmatic switching between liberal and conservative positions. For example, such discourse may endorse EU-driven reforms and a liberal constitution while at the same time encouraging strong group identity, obedience, and uniformity, which weakens acceptance of diversity. She notes that the AKP has taken a selective, à la carte approach to human rights, supporting some while rejecting others, and has shown authoritarian tendencies, including an unwillingness to tolerate dissent and a pattern of silencing or punishing critics (White, 2014, p. 186). In addition, we can argue that the AKP's adoption of

4 'Our place in the political spectrum is neither right nor left. Our identity is conservative and democratic.' ('Bizim siyaset yelpazesi içindeki yerimiz ne sağ ne soldur. Kimliğimiz de muhafazakar demokrat yapıdadır').

human rights and democracy were “tactical and superficial”, and it was done out of necessity and instrumentally (Çınar, 2018, p. 132). Especially, Erdoğan’s famous statement ‘Democracy is a tool for us’ has frequently been cited as proof of this argument (Cerrahoğlu, 1996). Therefore, when the AKP’s power is consolidated enough, it easily gave up on the reformist principles thanks to its pragmatism.

Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the AKP wanted to be and was a system party unlike the Welfare Party, which was considered an anti-system party (Mecham, 2004, p. 342). However, the AKP was not the first. Its predecessor, the Virtue Party⁵ tried to align itself with the system. Since the Virtue Party’s three predecessor parties⁶ were closed by the Kemalist establishment, this experience almost forced them to change their discourse. The Virtue Party adopted the pro-Western, pro-EU democracy discourse, which was formerly embraced by secular Kemalists, in order to survive within the establishment, and gave up the National Outlook discourse for this purpose (Dağı, 2005, pp. 27–29). After the closure of the Virtue Party, the AKP, one of the two parties that emerged from this party (reformist wing within the party), created a parallel party program with the claim that it was not pro-National Outlook or not even Islamist. Thus, similar to the Virtue Party but in contrast to the Welfare party, the AKP adopted a pro-Western, pro-EU, and democratic discourse. Öniş calls this shift a move towards liberal Islam (Öniş, 2001, pp. 283–284). Here, it is also important to remember that when the Welfare Party came into power, it was forced to temper its radical edges, since it was aiming for the centre of Turkish politics (Gülalp, 1999, p. 37). In the case of the AKP, however, this was done on the day it was founded.

According to some interpretations, the AKP’s early version of new Islamism was not aimed at seizing control of the state to impose Islam from the top down or at reshaping society in line with Islamic symbols and beliefs. Instead, it reflected a readiness to respond to specific Islamic demands, such as allowing headscarves on university campuses, in order to provide a basic level of individual liberty to its supporters. In fact, during the first period of its rule, the AKP did not even rush to fulfil these demands because it did not want to immediately confront the secular establishment (Çınar, 2018, pp. 128–129). As Dağı said, “a movement that embraces modern political values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, which advocates integration with the EU, and manages to get votes from all segments of society, can hardly be called Islamist”

5 Virtue Party (*Fazilet Partisi*, FP) founded in 1997, banned in 2001.

6 National Order Party (*Millî Nizam Partisi*, MNP) founded in 1970, banned in 1971, The National Salvation Party (*Millî Selâmet Partisi*, MSP) founded in 1972, banned in 1981, The Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*, RP) founded in 1983, banned in 1998.

(Dağı, 2005, p. 34). In fact, as will be seen, the AKP wanted to be and has been a system party; a party that has demonstrated its intention to reproduce the official discourse as a result of its survival strategy and that has been located in the centre of the political spectrum with no immediate intention of engaging into conflict with centres of power in Turkey at that time such as the Turkish Armed Forces, the high judiciary, the bureaucracy, the media and major business groups, which exhibited secular and statist tendencies. That's why it was founded with a party program that showed its intention to become a system party. According to Kubicek, although the AKP has changed its discourse later on, the reactions of the Kemalist-nationalists such as 'Sharia is coming' were perhaps unwarranted, because the AKP did not aim for that (Kubicek, 2020, p. 3).

With the transformations the AKP underwent during the 2010s, it became more explicitly authoritarian. For some, the party completely abandoned its initial liberal-democratic façade in the wake of the Gezi protests period: The AKP's discourse on democratization was instrumentalized to institutionalize its power, and later discarded in favour of consolidating control (Tugal, 2016, pp. 92–94). For others, the party, which was ostensibly established as a conservative democratic party, since 2011 returned to its ideological roots laid by the National Outlook movement, resulting in de-secularization and substantive Islamization (Gumuscu, 2024, p. 371). In addition, we can describe the political style under Erdoğan's leadership as a form of pragmatism based on personal authority, focused on outcomes and the retention of power, a characterization that aligns closely with the usage of the concept of pragmatism in this study. In this style, neither Islamism nor democracy function as fixed ideological determinants; the preservation of political power is the primary objective. As a result, Islamism has been functionalized, instrumentalized as a political resource that is emphasized when needed.

In brief, Islamism often emerges from a tension between ideological commitments and pragmatic political considerations, a dynamic clearly illustrated by the AKP in Turkey. While the AKP has roots in Islamist movements, it distanced itself from overt Islamism upon its founding in 2001, branding itself instead as a conservative democratic party (Yavuz, 2009, p. 2). Although it formally adheres to Turkey's secular constitution, the party has incorporated religious values into its politics, particularly in areas like education, family policy, and public morality, without explicitly calling for Islamic law. In this way, the AKP appealed to a broad electorate while gradually embedding Islamic references into public life, reflecting a strategic balance between ideological heritage and political adaptability.

2. Pragmatism in the Party Program and Policies

On August 14, 2001, the basic principles of the AKP were pronounced in its party program at the Bilkent Hotel Conference Hall (NTVMSNBC, 2001). The party program was called *The Development and Democratization Program*. The introduction was signed as Founders Committee and followed by sections on the basic rights and political principles, economy, public administration, social policies, foreign policy and finally the conclusion. The program was written in plain Turkish. Even though the AKP's party program has a plain language and stays away from the emotionally appealing conservative-nationalist vocabulary, in the introduction and conclusion, the statements such as "Everything will be better with Allah's help" (AKP's Program, 2002, p. 9), and "May Allah be the helper of our nation" (AKP's Program, 2002, p. 116) can be thought as reflecting its conservative character. However, the use of words such as Allah, secular, Atatürk, national, local and religious is limited, while the words such as people, trust, freedom, contemporary, and democrat are used frequently in the introduction of the program. In addition, throughout the text, the concepts of democracy, human rights, the rule of law and civil society are frequently emphasized. In summary, the discourse of democracy is dominant in the party program. In the following pages, various sections of the AKP's party program are examined in detail to demonstrate how pragmatism is embedded in the text and how it is reflected in the party's narrative and policy-making.

Fundamental rights and political principles

In the section addressing fundamental rights and political principles, the program emphasizes adherence to international legal norms and aspires to align with Western standards in this domain, highlighting the values of peace, democracy, and the relevance of Atatürk's principles and reforms in achieving these goals. With respect to human rights and fundamental freedoms, the text underscores the significance of international conventions. It unequivocally condemns practices such as torture, custodial deaths, enforced disappearances, and unresolved political killings, asserting that such violations are incompatible with the principles of a democratic rule-of-law state and will be rigorously combated. The program also devotes substantial attention to the issue of freedom of religion, presenting secularism primarily as a guarantor of this liberty. Although secularism is described as encompassing the freedom not to believe, the text notably omits an explicit affirmation of the state's secular character or a clear articulation of the separation between religion and state. Nevertheless, secularism is portrayed as a cornerstone of social harmony, designed not only to

ensure freedom of religion but also to protect the rights of non-believers to live without discrimination (AKP's Program, 2002, pp. 13–16).

Although non-believers are mentioned in the party program regarding the issue of secularism, Erdoğan's approach to religion has varied depending on the situation throughout his political life. Sometimes he completely rejected Islamism, sometimes he had clear Islamic discourse at the expense of non-believers. For example, in 1994 when he was the mayor of Istanbul, regarding the construction of a mosque in Taksim, Erdoğan said the following in an interview with Yalçın Akdoğan:

The crux of Istanbul tourism is that region [Taksim]. Once a person coming to that region sees that centre, s/he will understand that s/he is in an Islamic city (...) As we gradually reveal the historical and cultural texture of our city, I believe that the tourists coming to Istanbul will understand that they have come to a Muslim city (Akdoğan, 1994, p. 12).

But later, Erdoğan strikingly stated that he was never an Islamist (Hürriyet, 2002). As seen within 8 years, from opposition to power, Erdoğan changed his discourse sharply in relation to Islam. This shift can be considered an indication of his pragmatism.

In addition, it is stated in the program that the local governments will be strengthened, and that the principle of participatory democracy will be adopted (AKP's Program, 2002, p. 19). It is warranted that Copenhagen Criteria, which will ensure full membership to the EU, will be met. Finally, a solution to the Kurdish issue compatible with democracy and human rights will be adopted on the condition that the principles of unitary state structure and Turkish as the official language and the language of education remain intact (AKP's Program, 2002, pp. 26–28). We can say that this condition in the AKP's program, which expresses opposition to the demand for education in the mother tongue, in accordance with the official state policy of the Turkish state, reveals its intention to be a system party.

Moreover, democracy and the will of the nation, the importance of which the government often emphasizes in its daily politics, are also frequently emphasized: "According to our understanding of politics, the will of the nation is fundamental. Any practice that will overshadow the will of the nation cannot be tolerated" (AKP's Program, 2002, p. 17). Nevertheless, the AKP government's use of the *trustee* (*kayyum*) policy⁷ against the Peoples'

7 The 'trustee' (*kayyum*) policy refers to the AKP government's practice of removing elected mayors, primarily from the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP),

Democratic Party (HDP) is fundamentally at odds with the principles articulated in its own party program. This policy enables the AKP to replace the elected representatives with appointed trustees. It is important to highlight that the appointment of trustees has occurred predominantly in municipalities where Kurdish voters constitute the majority and where the HDP had electoral victories. This pattern is significant, as it indicates that the AKP has largely maintained Turkey's traditional securitized and exclusionary approach to the Kurdish issue, one of the most critical and longstanding challenges in the country's democratization process. While the AKP emphasized democratic values in its party program and continued to promote such rhetoric throughout its second decade in power, this period in fact witnessed the transformation of the regime into a form of competitive authoritarianism (Özbudun, 2022, p. 151).

In line with the pluralist principles articulated in its party program (AKP's Program, 2002, pp. 113–115), AKP initially launched a series of democratic initiatives, most notably *the solution process* (*çözüm süreci*) aimed at addressing the long-standing Kurdish issue. However, this initiative was eventually abandoned, largely due to the AKP's shifting pragmatic political priorities. Alongside the Kurdish initiative, the AKP also introduced the Alevi and Romani initiatives, which were framed as part of its broader commitment to democracy, pluralism, and inclusivity. Despite their initial promise, these initiatives were widely regarded as insufficient and largely symbolic. As political tensions intensified, particularly following the escalation of the power struggle between the AKP and the Gülen movement, as well as the nationwide Gezi Park protests, and as the AKP's vote rates began to decline, the government's stance grew increasingly repressive. This marked a significant departure from earlier reformist rhetoric. The abandonment of these pluralist initiatives culminated in the adoption of a nationalist and monist discourse, epitomized by the slogan 'one nation, one flag, one homeland, one state'. This slogan, emphasizing national unity and homogeneity, signalled a clear shift away from the AKP's earlier commitments to democratic pluralism. This narrative was repeatedly reinforced through the use of the phrase *local and national* (*yerli ve milli*), which became a defining feature of the government's discourse in subsequent years.

Following the abandonment of the solution process regarding the Kurdish issue, the AKP began to reframe the matter as a security problem rooted in terrorism and instigated by foreign powers. This shift in narrative was aligned with the party's pronounced anti-EU position, one that sharply contrasted with

which has since been succeeded by the Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM Party), on allegations of terrorism-related charges and appointing state-appointed trustees in their place. This policy has been widely criticized for undermining local democracy and electoral legitimacy.

its party program and early policies, once again drawing on the idea of external threats. It also aligns with Erdoğan's increasingly conspiratorial rhetoric, which portrays the opposition as linked to global elites. This rhetoric transforms anti-Western sentiment into a central pillar of the AKP's political strategy (Balta et al., 2022, p. 4). Over time, this discourse began to resonate strongly with the party's electorate, many of whom came to attribute a wide range of Turkey's social and economic challenges to the influence of unnamed or vaguely defined foreign powers. For instance, economic developments such as the depreciation of the Turkish lira, often euphemistically reported as an increase in the dollar exchange rate, not as a fall in the value of Turkish lira, have been framed as deliberate manipulations by external actors such as the United States (Öztürk, 2018) and, in some cases, the European Union or specific European countries. This rhetoric was sometimes accompanied by symbolic acts of protest, particularly during moments of diplomatic tension. One notable example occurred during the 2017 crisis with the Netherlands, during which members of the AKP's local organizations engaged in performative acts, such as stabbing oranges, to express their outrage. These acts were underpinned by a broader narrative suggesting that "foreign powers are constantly plotting against Turkey" (Evrensel Gazetesi, 2017). In sum, although the AKP's party program initially adopted a pro-EU orientation, during its second decade in power the party increasingly relied on anti-Western and anti-EU rhetoric as a strategy to consolidate its electoral base. Consequently, the prospect of EU membership, once a central goal, appears to have become a largely abandoned policy objective.

Economy

The AKP's party program clearly advocates for a market-oriented economy, supporting widespread privatization, including sectors like health, education, and energy and limiting the state's role to a regulator and supervisor. While the program also emphasizes strengthening civil society's role in basic services, this appears contradictory to its commitment to the social state. Kaya argues that the AKP's economic policy reflects a form of *prudentialism*, functioning as a technology of governmentality that shifts the responsibility for managing risks, such as unemployment, poverty, health, and security, onto individuals (Kaya, 2015, p. 3). Consistent with this approach, the AKP's party program emphasizes the role of civil society and the family, encouraging extended families and various community structures to compensate for the retreat of the social welfare state. This aligns with the party's broader pragmatic political strategy, which favours flexible, adaptive governance over rigid ideological commitments. The program expresses support for foreign capital and cooperation with institutions such as the EU, IMF, World Bank, and international credit

agencies. It also outlines plans to expand build-operate models and encourage production and investment to attract foreign currency inflows. However, the existence of vague statements such as blending cultural values with international norms may signal a pragmatic approach, allowing future deviations from global standards when deemed politically expedient (AKP's Program, 2002, pp. 33–44).

The AKP's party program reveals a tension between its commitment to neoliberalism, where the state acts primarily as a regulatory arbitrator, and its endorsement of interventionist measures, including reducing employment costs and providing incentives (AKP's Program, 2002, pp. 47–48). These elements suggest that the party retains certain statist reflexes despite its free-market rhetoric. Similarly, it is argued that although AKP elites are ideologically close to neoliberalism, fully embracing it would be politically risky for a party transitioning “from the periphery to the center” (Taşkın, 2017, p. 12). Economic *dirigisme*, in which the state plays a strong directive role in shaping and guiding the economy, rather than leaving it entirely to market forces, has emerged as a fundamental element of Erdoğan's authoritarian governance, with state intervention playing a central role in shaping economic policy (Türegün, 2023, p. 16). Notably, Erdoğan increasingly asserted personal control over economic decision-making during the second decade of his rule, particularly concerning interest rates, a domain laden with religious sensitivities in Islamic contexts. He frequently invoked his own authority by claiming to be an economist and placed the unconventional proposition that ‘interest is the cause and inflation is the result’ at the core of the government's economic strategy. This perspective led him to resist raising interest rates for an extended period, a stance he further legitimized through religious rhetoric, blending economic governance with ideological and theological justifications:

I am sorry to those of our friends with whom we walk together who defend interest. On this path, I cannot and will not be with those who defend interest. As long as I am in this position, I will continue my fight against interest and inflation until the end. Here, the Nas⁸ is evident. Do we have any right to intervene when the Nas is evident?⁹ (Haber Türk, 2021).

8 According to the TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi, the first general use of the word nas, which he uses in his statement, in Islamic sciences refers to ‘the word of Allah and the Prophet’.

9 ‘Beraber yürüdüğümüz arkadaşlarımızdan faizi savunanlar, kusura bakmasınlar. Bu yolda ben, faizi savunanla beraber olamam, olmam. Bu görevde olduğum sürece faiz ve enflasyonla mücadelemi sonuna kadar sürdüreceğim. Bu konuda nas ortada. Nas ortadayken sana, bana ne oluyor?’

In addition, he shifted away from the program's initial pro-Western orientation by increasingly attributing economic challenges to the influence of foreign powers, particularly Western actors, thus reframing domestic economic failures as externally induced. Erdoğan targeted 'foreign powers' in his defense of his economic policies by saying:

They tried to show us a weapon through the exchange rate, but they will not succeed, our weapon is stronger, our weapon is Nas [...] Interest makes the rich richer and the poor poorer. Now that we know this, let's act accordingly¹⁰ (Deutsche Welle Türkçe (DW), 2021).

This political stance yielded twofold pragmatic benefits: it both appealed to the religious sentiments of the electorate and provided a rationale for economic intervention in accordance with Erdoğan's agenda. However, as economic indicators deteriorated, he was compelled to abandon this ambitious rhetoric, adapting instead to the prevailing conditions.

Women and Family

In the social policies section, women are addressed in a distinct subsection that emphasizes their role not as autonomous individuals but primarily as caregivers and bearers of future generations. The text underscores the importance of women not only because they form the half of the society, but chiefly because of their function in raising healthy individuals. This framing sidelines issues such as women's socio-economic status and political participation, favouring a pro-family, pro-marriage perspective over an individual rights-based approach. In addition, the program's language, employing terms like encouragement and improvement, reflects a non-committal stance. Vague formulations such as "taking necessary measures to encourage women's participation in public life" and "encouraging women to take active roles in politics" lack concrete mechanisms such as quotas to ensure implementation. Similarly, references to enhancing social security and working conditions remain aspirational, with no mention of structural reforms like affirmative action (AKP's Program, 2002, pp. 87–91). These omissions align with the AKP's broader pragmatic orientation, using symbolic commitments to gender issues without challenging existing socio-political hierarchies.

10 'Döviz kuru üzerinden bize silah göstermeye kalktılar ama başaramayacaklar bizim silahımız daha güçlü, bizim silahımız Nas [...] Faiz zengini daha zengin, fakiri daha fakir yapıyor. Artık bunu bilelim buna göre hareket edelim'.

Moreover, the program's exclusive mention of child and family responsibilities in the context of women highlights a traditional and conservative view that positions women as primary caregivers. This reflects the party's broader emphasis on societal values over individual rights and suggests that improving women's social standing is superficial rather than substantive. The absence of structural measures aimed at addressing gender inequality implies a limited commitment to dismantling women's subordination, which is rooted in conservative gender norms. Furthermore, on the issue of violence, the program pledges to combat violence against women and address practices such as honour killings through educational initiatives, while also committing to the principles of the UN's *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (AKP's Program, 2002, pp. 88–89). Yet, as will be discussed later, the AKP's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention starkly illustrates its pragmatic and selective approach to women's rights.

In 2011, then-Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan publicly endorsed the *Istanbul Convention*, declaring violence against women is now recognized as a human rights violation, and emphasizing that the convention was drafted under Turkey's leadership (Erdoğan, 2011). A decade later, however, President Erdoğan adopted a vehemently oppositional stance toward the Istanbul Convention, stating, "Whoever begins a sentence with 'Istanbul Convention', our women should be the first to react" (BBC News Türkçe, 2021). The AKP justified its withdrawal from the convention by asserting that, although the convention was originally intended to promote women's rights, it had been subsequently appropriated by certain groups to advance the normalization of homosexuality, an agenda the party claimed conflicted with Turkey's societal and family values (Bianet, 2021).

The AKP government's withdrawal decision can be seen as a striking example of its political pragmatism. In this context, pragmatism refers to actions guided by the question: Does it serve the political goals of power, legitimacy, and survival in this context? In this case, the answer appears to be yes. While it is difficult to ascertain the exact motivations behind the AKP's decision to initiate the agreement in 2011, it can be argued that the AKP was still motivated by a desire to gain approval from the Western international community and to enhance its legitimacy on the global stage. However, by the time the agreement was withdrawn in 2021, the political context had shifted significantly. Faced with growing economic hardship and declining public support, the AKP appeared to adopt a more pragmatic approach, using the withdrawal as a means to consolidate its conservative voter base and potentially divert attention from the worsening economic situation.

The AKP's emphasis on the family over the individual and the reinforcement of traditional roles assigned to individuals within that structure is clearly articulated in its party program. Statements such as "It is clear that we owe our standing as a society largely to our strong family structure despite all the negativities and economic difficulties" and "Our party will give priority to family-centred policies" (AKP's Program, 2002, p. 89) reflect a neoliberal orientation that privileges familial structures as the cornerstone of social stability. Neoliberalism, as an ideology that blends elements of nineteenth-century liberalism and conservatism, simultaneously elevates the role of the individual in consumerist societies while reinvigorating the authority of family and community to compensate for the retreat of the welfare state, encouraging extended families and communal networks to assume responsibilities once managed by public institutions (Kaya, 2015, pp. 2–3). In the absence of a comprehensive social welfare state, it is logically consistent for the AKP to position the family as the primary locus of social support, idealizing traditional gender roles, particularly motherhood, while advancing pronatalist policies. One of the most emblematic expressions of Erdoğan's underlying vision of the family is his frequently repeated recommendation of having 'at least three children', a motto he often reiterates at wedding ceremonies, symbolizing his pronatalist stance and the central role of the family in his socio-political discourse. He also complements this motto by saying: "One is lonesome, two are rivals, three is balance, four is abundance, the rest is God's grace..."¹¹ (Bianet, 2014).

Finally, the AKP designated 2025 as the *Year of the Family* (Euronews, 2025) however, this initiative appeared insufficient, prompting the subsequent declaration of the following ten years as the *Decade of the Family* (T24, 2025). As part of this strategy, Erdoğan frequently targeted LGBTQI+ individuals and consistently emphasized that the fight against so-called LGBTQI+ propaganda and imposition would be carried out by focusing on the family. This family-oriented, anti-LGBTQI+ discourse, which reminds a religious propaganda strategy, aims to reinforce support among conservative-religious segments of society. At the same time, the neoliberal orientation of the state's social policy framework, characterized by limited institutionalized social security, enables the government to distribute social assistance selectively. This flexibility allows the AKP to deploy welfare provisions in a discretionary and pragmatic manner, strengthening its clientelist ties and consolidating political loyalty.¹² In other

11 'Bir olur garip olur, iki olur rakip olur, üç olur denge olur, dört olur bereket olur, gerisi Allah Kerim...'

12 For a discussion on the porous boundaries between clientelism and social policy in some cases and certain periods, see Kitschelt & Wilkinson (2007, p. 10) and Magaloni (2014, pp. 253–261).

words, this discourse serves a dual purpose: it consolidates the electorate by constructing a new enemy -LGBTQI+ people- under the guise of protecting the family, and it allows the state to shirk its broader responsibilities by shifting focus onto the family unit.

Education

The AKP's program explicitly states that a new constitution to transform Turkey into a state governed by *the rule of law* would be made through *the will of the people* and in the spirit of a social contract, while avoiding constitutional engineering (AKP's Program, 2002, p. 19). However, it would not be inaccurate to argue that, in defiance of its program, once the party consolidated its power, it began engaging in a form of social engineering aimed at the Islamization of the country, particularly within the field of education. The party has significantly expanded Imam Hatip schools, which were historically regarded by the National View movement as its ideological stronghold. As a result, the Turkish educational curriculum has undergone substantial Islamization, while secular education has increasingly been marginalized (Gumuscu, 2024, pp. 383–385).

The program outlines a vision for a radical reform in education. It proposes the decentralization of basic education services by transferring them to local governments, while assigning the Ministry of National Education a supervisory, regulatory, and standard-setting role. The program also emphasizes encouraging private sector investment in education, aiming to expand the number of private educational institutions. Additionally, it advocates for equal opportunities for all high school and equivalent school graduates in university entrance examinations and expresses support for optional religious education. Notably, however, the program makes no mention of the headscarf issue, an omission that signals the party's pragmatic stance and its effort to distance itself from a strictly Islamist identity (AKP's Program, 2002, pp. 72–77). As Mecham argues (Mecham, 2004, p. 340), religious preferences were not abandoned but strategically reframed to engage with the existing political regime on its own terms. In line with this approach, the AKP refrained from prioritizing the headscarf issue during its early years in power, effectively shelving it to be addressed at a more opportune moment.

Another illustrative example is the slogan 'We will raise a pious generation,'¹³ which emerged during the period when the AKP had consolidated its political power:

13 'Dindar gençlik yetiştireceğiz'.

[...] in my statement [...] there is religious youth upbringing. I stand behind this. Do you expect us to raise atheist youth from a party that has the identity of a conservative democratic party? [...] We will raise a generation that is conservative, democratic and upholds the principles that come from history. We are here for this¹⁴ (Hürriyet, 2012).

As this example illustrates, the AKP's use of religion serves not only to appeal to its conservative voter base, but also functions as a strategic tool for constructing the ideological hegemony of the state (Yavuz & Öztürk, 2019, p. 7).

Almost simultaneously with this statement, one of the most significant strategic policies introduced by the AKP government in the field of education was the 4+4+4 education reform, which was enacted in 2012. This reform restructured Turkey's school system into three tiers of four years each and drawn substantial criticism for lacking a scientific basis, and for its broader socio-cultural implications. By permitting students to shift to open (distance) or home education after the second year of primary education, the reform has disproportionately affected children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, particularly girls, by facilitating their early withdrawal from the formal education system (Boğaziçi University, Faculty of Education, 2012; Middle East Technical University, Faculty of Education, 2012). This shift increased the risk of early marriages and child labour, reinforcing patriarchal norms and limiting educational and economic opportunities for young people. In addition, the reform's gradual structure enabled earlier access to Imam Hatip religious schools starting from the fifth grade, fostering exposure to conservative-religious values at a younger age. In this way, the reform contributes to a deliberate reorientation of childhood education away from secular and egalitarian principles, aligning instead with the AKP's objective of cultivating a pious generation. Thus, the 4+4+4 policy plays a pivotal role in redefining the modern Turkish family by reasserting traditional hierarchies and conservative gender roles through the mechanism of educational policy. Although the AKP initially positioned itself against social engineering, the ideological reforms implemented in the education system represent a clear example of the party's approach to consolidating power through state-led cultural and social transformation.

14 '[...] Benim ifademde [...] dindar bir gençlik yetiştirme var. Bunun arkasındayım. Muhafazakâr demokrat partisi kimliğine sahip bir partiden ateist bir gençlik yetiştirmemizi mi bekliyorsun? Senin öyle bir amacın olabilir ama bizim böyle bir amacımız yok. Biz muhafazakâr, demokrat, tarihten gelen ilkelerine sahip çıkan bir nesil yetiştireceğiz. Bunun için varız'.

One motivation behind the AKP's current push to shorten compulsory education (Atabay, 2025), despite having previously extended it to 12 years under certain conditions, is the MESEM¹⁵ system, which reflects a market-oriented approach. The education system, heavily shaped by the rapid expansion of Imam-Hatip schools intended to cultivate a future AKP voter base, puts the loosely defined concept of "values education" (18. Millî Eğitim Şûrası Kararları, 2010, pp. 10–12) at the core of its qualifications. This "values education" is closely tied to raising a religious youth, yet it coexists with a market-driven mindset, reflecting the AKP's broader pragmatic vision for education.

Conclusion

This article has argued that pragmatism is not simply a by-product of the AKP's political evolution, but a foundational characteristic embedded within its party program and evident throughout its policy trajectory. From its early years of pro-EU, pro-democracy rhetoric to its later consolidation of power through authoritarian measures, the AKP has demonstrated a consistent willingness to adapt its discourse and actions to shifting political contexts and strategic needs. Rather than adhering to a fixed ideological framework, the party has skilfully instrumentalized Islamism, nationalism, neoliberalism, and even liberal democratic values to maintain power, legitimacy, and social control. In other words, the AKP's pragmatism is not merely an adaptive trait but a defining element of its political identity. By examining the party's program alongside its evolving policies and rhetoric, this study has shown how the AKP's political trajectory has been guided by a strategic flexibility that privileges survival, consolidation of power, and electoral success over ideological coherence or principled governance.

AKP's political identity, while initially rooted in conservative democracy, has morphed over time into a more overtly authoritarian and culturally

15 MESEM (*Mesleki Eğitim Merkezi*) is vocational apprenticeship system where students spend one day a week in school and four days in a workplace, earning partial wages and basic insurance. It was introduced in December 2016 by presidential decree (KHK 6764) as a reform of earlier apprenticeship schools. It was designed to link education with employment, but critics warn it pushes teenagers into the labour market too early as cheap labour for employers, with public funds subsidizing wages. The system reduces formal education time, limiting academic and cultural learning, while it is claimed hundreds of student workplace injuries and several deaths in recent years (BBC News Türkçe, 2024; TMMOB İşçi Sağlığı ve İş Güvenliği Çalışma Grubu, 2024). Opponents argue it prioritizes employer benefit over students' safety, education, and long-term well-being.

conservative posture, especially in the face of domestic and international challenges. Whether in its initial leadership in and later rejection of the Istanbul Convention or the shift from the EU alignment to anti-Western rhetoric or the Islamization of education despite initial commitments to pluralism, the AKP's political behaviour underscores a consistent pattern: policies are not driven by ideology but by what is perceived to best serve the party's strategic interests at a given moment.

In addition, from its inception, the AKP positioned itself as a system party distancing itself from the more visible and principled version of Islamism of its predecessors and embraced a discourse grounded in democratic norms, human rights, and EU integration. However, this liberal-democratic posture functioned more as a tactical entry point into the political mainstream than as a steadfast commitment. The language of pluralism and reform present in the party program allowed the AKP to cultivate domestic and international legitimacy during its formative years, while leaving ample room for future recalibration.

Moreover, the AKP's policies in key areas, such as democratic reform, economic liberalization, gender equality, minority rights, and education, further exemplify how its pragmatism has operated in practice. The use of symbolic rhetoric, vague programmatic language, and contradictory policy actions creates ambiguity, which accommodates multiple constituencies while maintaining the party's political authority. This authority has not only marginalized alternative voices, such as Kurds, Alevis, secularists, and LGBTQI+ communities, but also eroded the institutional and normative foundations of Turkish democracy. In addition, its success in navigating and ultimately reshaping the contours of Turkish politics lies in its ability to instrumentalize ideologies, whether Islamist, liberal or nationalist, while maintaining a singular focus on power retention. The party's evolution from a pro-reform, moderate force to a competitive authoritarian power reflects not a betrayal of its founding principles, but the realization of a political program that was open-ended and ambiguous from the outset.

This paper also highlighted the importance of critically engaging with political party programs not as static declarations of ideology, but as dynamic instruments of strategy. The case of the AKP demonstrates how foundational texts can encode flexibility, enabling parties to continuously adapt, reposition, and even contradict themselves while maintaining an appearance of coherence. Finally, the AKP's trajectory clearly exemplifies how political pragmatism can reshape both party identity and state-society relations. It offers a compelling case of how pragmatism can serve as both a strategy for political survival and a mechanism for transforming a party from the margins into the dominant force

within a competitive authoritarian regime, which has been used to describe the regime in Turkey.

However, in light of the recent developments the accuracy of such description is in question. Particularly the annulment of the opposition's presidential candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu's academic credentials and his subsequent arrest alongside other opposition mayors on corruption charges, suggest that the boundaries of political competition in Turkey have contracted even further to the extent that the very concept of "competitive authoritarianism" has come under question. Beyond the erosion of minimal conditions such as equality and fairness in electoral processes, media pluralism, and judicial independence, the scale of repression directed at the opposition indicates a potential shift from a competitive to a more closed authoritarian configuration.

In any case, other recent developments such as the decision to initiate a new Kurdish peace process shortly after condemning the opposition for engaging with the DEM Party on grounds of alleged terrorism illustrates that pragmatism -bordering opportunism- remains a defining feature of the party's political strategy. This exemplifies how the AKP's founding-era flexibility and adaptive pragmatism have increasingly been supplanted by a strategy primarily focused on preserving the status quo and consolidating political control. In other words, the pragmatism that once facilitated the party's survival and ascent now appears less as a mechanism for enhancing regime adaptability and more as a strategy aimed at sustaining existing power relations.

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