Party Change in the Post-Secular Age: The Case of Republican People's Party in Turkey[*]

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ABSTRACT

The Republican People's Party (RPP) of Turkey is currently the main opposition party against the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP). While the RPP has usually been identified with a "rigid" understanding of secularism, the party has been experiencing a process of ideational change for more than a decade under the leadership of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. This study aims to describe and explain the party's shift to a "softer" version of secularism. Under the light of party change literature, one internal and two external factors are identified. The impact of leadership change, the internal factor, is examined with reference to major strategic and ideational changes initiated by Kılıçdaroğlu. The first major external stimulus is the global and local hegemony of post-secularism, which refers to the idea and practice of a new balance between citizenship and difference, allowing a greater space for religious arguments and images in the public sphere. The second is the transition to presidential system in Turkey, which both forced and facilitated the RPP's search for electoral alliances with conservative parties in a personalized winner-takes-all game. It is claimed that these factors have made the RPP reassess the effectiveness of its commitment to classical secularism in meeting the renewed party goal of vote maximization. Reverse pressures on the party will also be examined in the article, with an aim of foreseeing the RPP's leaning in the near future.

Key Words: *Republican People's Party, Secularism, Post-Secular Society, Party Change*
JEL Classification: *Z1, D72, Y80*

Post-Seküler Çağda Parti Değişimi: Türkiye'de Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi Örneği

ÖZ

Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP) günümüzde hükümet partisi Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) karşısında Türkiye'nin ana muhalefet partisi konumundadır. CHP genellikle "katı" bir laiklik anlayışıyla özdeşleştirilmekle birlikte parti yaklaşık son on yılda Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu liderliğinde bir düşünsel değişim sürecinden geçmiştir. Bu çalışma, CHP'nin daha "yumuşak" bir laiklik anlayışına geçişini tasvir etmeyi ve açıklamayı amaçlamaktadır. Parti değişimi literatürünün önermeleri ışığında, bir iç ve iki dış faktör üzerinde durulmaktadır. İç faktör olan lider değişikliğinin etkisi, Kılıçdaroğlu tarafından başlatılan büyük stratejik ve düşünsel değişikliklere atıfla incelenmektedir. Dışsal faktörlerin ilki, yurttaşlık ve farklılıklar arasında yeni bir denge kurulması düşüncesi ve pratiğine işaret eden, dinsel savların ve imajların kamusal alanda daha fazla yer almasına izin veren post-sekülarizmin küresel ve yerel hegemonyasıdır. İkinci olarak, Türkiye'de başkanlık sistemine geçiş, CHP'nin kişiselleştirilmiş bir kazanan her şeyi alır oyununda muhafazakar partilerle seçim ittifakı kurma arayışına girmesine neden olmuş ve onu kolaylaştırmıştır. Bu faktörlerin CHP'yi klasik laiklik modeline bağlılığın yenilenmiş parti hedefi olan oy maksimizasyonunu gerçekleştirmedeki

etkililiğini gözden geçirmeye ittiği öne sürülmektedir. Çalışmada ayrıca parti üzerindeki tersine basınç da ele alınacak ve partinin yakın gelecekteki eğilimleri öngörülmeye çalışılacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, Laiklik, Post-Seküler Toplum, Parti Değişimi*
JEL Sınıflandırması: *Z1, D72, Y80*

INTRODUCTION

The Republican People's Party (RPP, *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*), which is the main opposition party to the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) in Turkey, held its ordinary congress in November 4-5, 2023. Since his latest electoral loss to the incumbent President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in May 2023, the leader of the RPP, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, had been facing intraparty challenges. Having been elected as party chair in 2010, Kılıçdaroğlu played a very important role in the transformation of the party in the last 13 years. A revised approach to secularism has a major place in the party's new outlook, which is usually labeled as "the new RPP"[1].

The party's low profile on the gradual removal of the headscarf bans for students and public servants, moderation in the party's approach to religious orders, rise of certain party figures with Islamist origins or those with softer ideas and practices on the public visibility of Islam, and more recently, an electoral alliance with conservative parties including splinter parties led by former JDP leaders are among the indicators of a new understanding on the proper place of religion in the public and political sphere. In the ideational space, this shift is reflected in a redefinition of secularism mostly as the assurance of freedom of faith and worship. This notion is explicitly outlined in the 2018 election manifesto under a section titled "A libertarian secularism that respects faiths" (CHP, 2018: 112-113). Kılıçdaroğlu also took an apologetic attitude regarding party's earlier approach, which he considered as the main reason for the distance between the RPP and the conservative masses (NTV, 2019).

Much of the scholarly literature agrees on a broad transformation of the RPP including a shift from an assertive/rigid secularist stance to an inclusive/soft one (Angeletopoulos and Areteos, 2021; Ciddi and Esen, 2014; Erçetin and Boyraz, 2023; Şen and Yenigün Altın, 2019), though some are suspicious of the prospects of replacement of old themes and goals (Boyraz, 2020; Dündar and Taylan, 2017). Kılıçdaroğlu's personal role in attempting to turn the RPP into a catch-all party freed from its "ideological rigidity" is highlighted as a major factor (Gürpınar, 2022; Uysal, 2011; Wuthrich and Ingleby, 2020; Yavuz and Öztürk, 2023). Yet, major moments, characteristics and dynamics of this transformation remain understudied. This article attempts to contribute to the field by particularly focusing on the change in the secularist identity of the RPP rather than taking it as a part of

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[1] While the label was first used in a neutral way by Kılıçdaroğlu himself to refer to the new party administration and its mentality (Bianet, 2010), it soon took on a pejorative connotation. A group of critics inside and outside the party, who might be defined as "nationalists", labelled the party as Y-CHP (stands for new-RPP). Their objection centers upon the supposed alienation of the RPP from its historical mission and values such as the commitment to a unitary structure, secularism and anti-imperialism (See Anadolu Ajansı, 2021).

a broader change towards a more pro-democratic, globalist, liberal, or left-populist position.

The article further aims to contribute to the field by analyzing this change under the light of party change literature, which studies the conditions, factors, and mechanisms of considerable modifications in political parties. Valuable insights can be derived from this literature for understanding the global and local environmental factors and opportunity structures that influenced the recent transformation of the RPP leadership's perspective on secularism in the last decade. To begin with, post-secularism stands as a major global trend that compelled mainstream secularist political parties to acknowledge that the religious-secularist cleavage was no longer pertinent, and to substantially alter their positions accordingly. Nevertheless, we must go beyond generalizations and look for explanations for the reasons and mechanisms of this particular case. For that aim, this study will offer an examination of recent trends in and around the RPP related to the role of leadership, as well as coalition building and interest aggregation in a highly polarized presidential political system. In the conclusion part, possible reverse pressures and backflows in a highly desecularized environment will also be examined, with an aim of foreseeing the RPP's leaning in the near future.

I. INSIGHT FROM THE PARTY CHANGE LITERATURE

The literature on party change deals with changes in the organization, ideologies, strategies, and tactics of political parties. Although certain studies on political parties offer more deterministic approaches on the trajectory of parties, it is now broadly accepted that political parties, even old and traditional ones, can make organizational and ideational changes, triggered by various factors and challenges (Mazzoleni and Heinisch, 2023). Party leadership and intraparty coalitions are among major internal factors. Electoral defeat is usually considered as a key but not the only external factor. There is a broad agreement that grand socio-economic and technological changes affect party competition and hence individual parties (Mazzoleni and Heinisch, 2023: 12). Yet, there are differences regarding the relative impact of and relationship between internal and external factors.

Panebianco (1988) and Harmel and Janda (1994) are widely recognized in the party change literature as major contributors to the field. Panebianco (1988: 242-47) identifies three phases of party change. In the first stage, usually an electoral defeat delegitimizes the dominant coalition in the party, leading to the second phase in which a counter-elite partially or entirely replaces the leadership. In the final stage, new leadership makes organizational, strategic and even ideological changes to consolidate and legitimate its power. Although Panebianco seems to highlight the impact of leadership change on ideational transformations, he nevertheless attributes to external factors a catalyzer role.

In their seminal study seeking to explain why parties change their strategies, organization, and issue positions, Harmel and Janda (1994) similarly argue that party changes mostly result from abrupt decisions of party notables rather than a continuous and spontaneous evolution, and they also include external

factors in the analysis. The novelties they introduce are (1) differentiating political parties in terms of their "primary goals" (vote maximizers, office maximizers, policy/ideology advocates, intraparty democracy maximizers), (2) defining "external shock" as an external stimulus that is qualitatively and quantitatively different from other external stimuli, providing a "good cause" for change given the conservative nature of parties, and (3) linking those two concepts by arguing that what makes an environmental factor a shock for an individual party is the assessment of party elites about the effectiveness of an idea or strategy in meeting primary party goal. Harmel and Janda (1994: 263-67) also underline that the external stimulus is not limited to electoral failure but refers to anything outside the party that makes it revisit its effectiveness, such as global policy changes, constitutional reforms, or birth of new parties.

The party change literature offers several conclusions that can shed light on this article's analysis of the RPP's journey towards a new understanding of secularism. First, leadership change is likely to lead to party change, either simply serving the new leader to secure his/her power base or expressing the genuine introduction new goals or strategies (Harmel and Janda, 1994: 280). Both seem present in the RPP case. Following Deniz Baykal's unexpected resignation for personal reasons in May 2010, Kılıçdaroğlu declared that he will run for party chair and had an easy win thanks to the support of the very powerful general secretary of the party and other factions at the time. However, he soon lost that initial widespread support, and it took more than two years for Kılıçdaroğlu to consolidate his power in the party. In this process, according to Tosun (2015), Kılıçdaroğlu wanted to put forth his differences from Baykal by giving priority to the matters of economy and social justice over rigid secularism, and by moving away from a negative and reactive political language to a proactive one. Kılıçdaroğlu has also been quite determined from the beginning to restructure the RPP as a catch-all party (Gürpınar, 2022; Tosun, 2015; Uysal, 2011). Catch-all parties are identified by the trends of de-ideologization, detachment from particular social groups, and growth in the role of personalized leadership (Krouwel, 2003: 26-27). It is beyond the scope of this paper to make a broad analysis of the RPP as a party. Nevertheless, within the limits of this study, it is assumed that the RPP under Kılıçdaroğlu shifted the focus from "policy purity" (Harmel and Janda, 1994) to electoral success or vote maximization.

While leadership is a very important factor, there is always an interplay with the broader environmental context, which brings us to the second set of insight from the party change literature. A clear and broad mandate for change requires an external shock, without which the scope of change will be limited (Harmel and Janda, 1994: 266). As mentioned above, it may be an electoral failure or other factors that make a party to reassess its effectiveness in reaching the primary goal. Repeated electoral defeats have certainly allowed the RPP leadership to justify major ideational changes, especially those in the party's approach to secularism, but it would be a stretch to claim that the external stimulus for the new RPP of the 2010s was electoral defeat. Regarding opposition parties, an electoral defeat refers

not to the inability to come to power but to a decrease in votes and seats (Paceśniak and Bachryj-Krzywaźnia, 2019: 126). In that sense, the RPP was successful in the 2010s in more or less keeping the votes in an environment where the feel-good factor was in favor of the JDP due to economic indicators and improving international political and economic relations. So, two other external factors will be offered as keys to understand the post-secular turn in the RPP.

The first factor, which will be analyzed in detail in the next section, is the global and local dominance of post-secularism as a new approach to define the mutual boundaries of religion and politics. At first glance, it might not seem as important as other global "ideological shocks" or "policy-related stimuli" (Harmel and Janda, 1994: 280) like the collapse of communism or the decline of the welfare state, which dramatically changed communist and social democratic parties respectively. However, considering the historical and ongoing significance of cultural cleavages in Turkish politics, a major paradigm shift in this matter would more likely come as a shock. Cleavage theory that originates in the work of Lipset and Rokkan (1967), studies the translation of social conflicts into party systems and into the characteristics of individual parties. In the Turkish case, as will be elucidated further in the next section, it is widely accepted that, rather than geographical or functional cleavages, a cultural cleavage between a secularist-nationalist-statist center and traditionalist-religious-liberal periphery is decisive (Özbudun, 2013). Given this central role played by religion in Turkish politics, the post-secular turn is a major factor that needs to be analyzed.

The second external factor is the gradual transition to presidential system that remolded the relationships between parties and the broader political and ideological space in Turkey. According to Bille, a change in policy orientation in response to a failure in achieving strategic or value goals, would be operationalized as a new manifesto and a new coalition behavior (Bille, 1997: 380). On the other hand, new coalition behavior may also be a cause rather than the consequence. Other parties are always an important environmental factor, with their "contagion" effect. If most major parties agree on a "norm", others might feel pressured to fit. Especially "in settings where coalitions are commonplace, … 'you'd better not only look and act like them, but even think enough like them to be considered acceptable'" (Harmel and Janda, 1994: 264). Sudden transition to such a new setting may stimulate party change. In the RPP case, the constitutional amendment ratified in the 2007 referendum that introduced the election of president by popular vote, and the eventual transition to presidential system after the 2017 referendum, forced the parties to seek electoral alliances, which is quite different from post-electoral coalitions in a parliamentary system. The presidential system has accelerated Kılıçdaroğlu's efforts to restructure the party, by nurturing de-ideologization and personalization of politics on the one hand, and by justifying the party's ideological transformation in the eyes of the RPP electorate as the only way to win in a winner-takes-all game.

Considering the relative importance of these three factors, it must be noted that the literature does not offer a universal order of importance of causes for party

change. It is usually accepted that each case should be individually examined to identify drivers of change, and that we would come up with a combination of external and internal conditions and stimuli, rather than a single dominant factor. Gauja further offers a multi-level framework including internal drivers (party level), competitive pressures (party system level), and systemic pressures (political system level). She argues that "a congruence of factors, or favourable conditions across all three levels, suggest a stronger impetus for change or a greater chance for successful implementation" (Gauja, 2017: 7, 11-12). It is possible to observe all sort of factors and levels in the RPP case. As a major change in political norms and practices, spread of post-secularism is a necessary factor without which the outcome would not occur. It is a complicated process with multiple theoretical, socio-economic, and political dimensions. Thus, a separate section will be devoted to the description of this factor and how it has unfolded in the Turkish context. Leader change and transition to presidential system might be defined as sufficient conditions that have jointly produced the change. The shift in the primary goal of the party to vote maximization, initiated by the leader, would probably not have resonated among the electorate in the absence of the opportunities emerging from presidentialism and the new electoral law. On the other hand, presidentialism would not have necessarily made the RPP seek allies from among the conservatives without the leader's insistence on the adoption of a new primary goal and strategy for the party. Since these two conditions are entangled with the major moments of the process of ideational change that the RPP has undergone, they will not be covered in separate sections.

II. POST-SECULARISM AS A GLOBAL AND LOCAL FACTOR FOR CHANGE

Transformation of political actors in Turkey in the recent decades owes a lot to a certain judgment about the earlier practices of secularism and prospects for a new understanding of secularism. This new approach reflects the world-wide trend of theorizing the phenomenon of desecularization on the basis of a critique of secularization paradigm that had been dominant throughout much of the 20th century. Secularization paradigm is built on the interrelated arguments that religion is incompatible with modernization and that there had been a long-term trend of exclusion of religion from politics as well as a growing dominance of secular worldview in the society. Critiques of secularization theory, on the other hand, have argued since the 1960s that religion continues to be a major source of meaning and identity, and the top-down secularization process was doomed to fail as the recent global resurgence of religion proves (See Berger, 1967; Glasner, 1977). These arguments ended up with the norms about a "post-secular society", which are depicted in its predominant liberal form by Jürgen Habermas.

Habermas (2008) has criticized what he called the hard naturalism of secularists and offered a "postsecular balance between shared citizenship and cultural difference". This balance includes both the neutrality of institutionalized decision-making processes towards competing religious convictions and "the permissibility of religious utterances within the political public sphere". The former

element reflects his commitment to a certain type of universal reason and a secular/post-metaphysical formal public sphere. While using religious arguments in the informal democratic public sphere freely, religious citizens should acknowledge religious heterogeneity and secular legitimation of state in modern societies, and accept that "religious utterances must be translated into a generally accessible language before they can find their way onto the agendas of parliaments, courts, or administrative bodies," formal deliberations of which result in collectively binding decisions (Habermas, 2006: 9, 14; Habermas, 2011: 25-26).

Regarding the latter element of the post-secular balance he calls for, Habermas argues:

> Two reasons speak in favor of such liberal practice. First, the persons who are neither willing nor able to divide their moral convictions and their vocabulary into profane and religious strands must be permitted to take part in political will formation even if they use religious language. Second, the democratic state must not preemptively reduce the polyphonic complexity of the diverse public voices, because it cannot know whether it is not otherwise cutting society off from scarce resources for the generation of meanings and the shaping of identities. Particularly with regard to vulnerable social relations, religious traditions possess the power to convincingly articulate moral sensitivities and solidaristic intuitions. (Habermas, 2008: 28-29)

Habermas' recognition of religious ideas as a source of meaning and identity and a legitimate part of the public sphere has contributed a lot to the contemporary mainstream liberal outlook on the matter. However, multiculturalist critics have convicted the call for a universally accessible language in the formal public sphere as a reproduction of oppressive Enlightenment legacy. Charles Taylor has criticized Rawls and Habermas for establishing a hierarchy between secular reason and religion as sources of moral-political justification, and for denying free and equal status to some people today on the grounds of a historic institutional arrangement between secular and clerical authority that dates back to a couple of centuries ago (Taylor, 2011: 48-53). He proposed a redefinition of secularism by saying "We think that secularism (or *laïcité*) has to do with the relation of the state and religion; whereas in fact it has to do with the (correct) response of the democratic state to diversity" (Taylor, 2011: 36).

With significant insight derived from multiculturalist critics as well, Habermasian theoretical and normative position now globally dominates politics of religion and secularism. Its embodiment in the Turkish case involves a severe critique of the Kemalist top-down modernization modelled on the French *laicité* and the securitization, and hence exclusion, of religious actors. This critique is based on a certain narrative about both the one-party period under Mustafa Kemal, and about its secular-authoritarian legacy in the later "democratic" period after 1945 that is marked by the tutelage of the military (See Hazır, 2020; Palabıyık, 2018).

The major intellectual source for this analysis is the center-periphery duality developed by Şerif Mardin. According to Mardin (1973), while there have been multiple social and political confrontations in the West like state versus church, nation-state-builders versus decentralizationists, capitalists versus workers, there is one single major confrontation in the Ottoman-Turkish history between the centralized and strong state and all societal groups excluded from political decision making. Modernization process perpetuated this duality and pushed the religious establishment into the ranks of the periphery besides provincial religious heterodoxy (Mardin, 1973). Consequently, for Mardin (1998), secular Turkish republic has failed to create an "ethos" that could compete with the riches of Islam in terms of its symbolic and semantic sources. Based on this framework, since the 1990s, many prominent scholars of Turkish politics alike have defined Kemalist secularism as a rigid/assertive type (Kuru, 2011), an "internal eurocentrism" (Gülalp, 2005), an anti-religious idea and practice that does not resonate in the civil society at all (Kurtoğlu, 2009). They also have regarded Islamist activism of the 1990s as a response of the periphery to the positivist civilizing project, and praised them as potential participants of democratization of state-society relationship in Turkey unless they reproduce exclusionary and totalitarian aspects of Kemalist modernization (Göle, 1997; Keyder, 1997; Yavuz, 2003).

Whether these new ideas have also transformed secular actors like the RPP is worth studying because it would prove that post-secularism is not a matter of political domination of non-secular actors over secular ones in a certain moment but rather a trend encompassing divergent mainstream political actors. For understanding the adoption of post-secularism by mainstream actors, we must take into consideration the growing partnership between the state and NGOs, including faith-based organizations, "even in nations that have historically separated church and state," under contemporary neoliberal regimes (Ghatak and Abel, 2013: 217-218). Burchardt (2017), by referring to some unsuccessful attempts in Western countries to apply a radical form of secularism, argues that the transnationalization of labor markets, the significance of attracting foreign investment including Islamic capital, and the role of religious organizations in securing social order and discipline, make rigid secularism doomed to fail. Religious organizations are now considered as legitimate agents of charity and cultural identity-based solidarity that replaced welfare state and class-based solidarity in the neoliberal age, a trend which the RPP must align with as an aspirant to political power. In the next section, we will examine how the RPP has been struggling to redefine itself for nearly a decade to come to terms with post-secularism. Special moments and patterns in this journey to "libertarian secularism" under Kılıçdaroğlu will be identified under the light of the theoretical arguments made above.

III. THE RPP'S JOURNEY TO "LIBERTARIAN SECULARISM" UNDER KILIÇDAROĞLU

Some scholars trace an early version of the recent decrease in the significance of secularism in the RPP's discourse back in the 1970s. According to this view, the RPP under Ecevit has pursued a social democratic path and focused

on matters of economic and social redistribution. The party has "softened its militant conception of secularism and defined its new position as 'secularism respectful of religious beliefs'" (Özbudun, 2013: 45-46). Ugur-Cinar et al. (2003: 10) argue that the short-lived coalition government with the Islamist National Salvation Party in 1974 exemplified Ecevit's "cleavage-transcending attitude", which is explained by Ecevit himself as a correction to the wrong assumption "that all religiously observant people are against innovation and progress". However, the polarization following the rise of militant Islamist activism in the early-1990s and the military's harsh response to the rise of Islamist Welfare Party with the "postmodern coup" of February 28, 1997, brought an end to the trend initiated by Ecevit.

With two brief interruptions, Deniz Baykal had been the RPP chair between 1992 and 2010[2]. It is usually claimed that the RPP under Baykal has assumed a secularist and nationalist attitude against the Islamist and Kurdish challenges to the state, and diverged from social democracy (Ciddi and Esen, 2014; Emre, 2015; Kılıçdaroğlu, 2020; Özbudun, 2013). Although it is obvious that Ecevit and Baykal had their differences, two points must not go unnoticed. First, Ecevit's position in the 1970s, which is shaped under the influence of politics of redistribution, is quite different from the current post-secular framework that reflects the predominance of politics of recognition. Second, Ecevit's rigid secularism and pro-military position in the late 1990s is understated in the studies that focus on highlighting the divergence between Baykal and Kılıçdaroğlu. Without conceptual clarity and empirical accuracy, one can even mistake Baykal's welcoming of chador wearing women in the party known as "chador opening" (CNN Türk, 2008), his invitations to right-wing figures including a religious community leader (Hürriyet, 2007), or the very idea of "Anatolian left" he offered in the 1990s together with İsmail Cem that addressed the values of Anatolian Islam as a major historical source (Çaha, 2003: 100), for the post-secular turn under Kılıçdaroğlu. As a matter of fact, while emphasizing that his steps did not imply a revision in the RPP's position about headscarf ban in the public sphere, Baykal referred to the continuity between Ecevit and himself by mentioning how "during their efforts to renew the RPP, he and Ecevit had realized the fact that cultural conservatism and political conservatism were not identical, and the party had to reach out to many devout citizens close to social democratic values" (Bila, 2008).

Kılıçdaroğlu, on the other hand, has moved beyond simply reaching out to conservative electorate or shifting priorities, and publicly acknowledged the legitimacy of religious utterances and symbols in the public sphere. Even before Baykal's resignation, he told in a conversation with conservative people and journalists, it was wrong that the RPP took the JDP's decision to remove the headscarf ban to Constitutional Court two years ago (Yükselir, 2010). After becoming party chair, Kılıçdaroğlu said during a visit to Germany in September 2010, "I cannot say that secularism is at stake today. I must substantiate the claim,

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[2] Ecevit did not return to the RPP when his political ban was removed 7 years after the 1980 coup, and formed his own Democratic Left Party, which turned into a minor party by the early 2000s.

but the argument would hang in the air unsupported by facts. Obviously, we must extend the liberties in the field of religion. Nevertheless, we must also prevent the very problem of politicization of religion – the use of religion for political purposes." and added that the headscarf ban in the universities must be removed (Hürriyet, 2010).

Kılıçdaroğlu did not step back in this issue despite reaction from some RPP MPs (NTV, 2010); on the contrary, he gave a message to the party, calling for leaving behind the fixation to the fear of losing secularism and seeing that what has really been lost was social welfare state and the rule of law (Cumhuriyet, 2010). It is of symbolic importance that this speech was given soon after the headscarf ban for university students was practically removed after a Higher Education Council letter sent to İstanbul University. Also, when the ban for public servants was legally removed in 2013, and later for secondary school students in 2014, no legal or organized political reaction came from the RPP. Kılıçdaroğlu was even going to claim quite later that he had called the president of the Higher Education Council as soon as he became the party chairman and told him that he was not against the entry of veiled women students to universities (Gazete Duvar, 2022).

Another major indicator of policy change in the RPP regarding secularism is the party's approach to religious orders, which were outlawed in 1925. Religious orders have revived since 1945, and gained semi-legal status in the 1980s thanks to the support of the prime minister, and later president, Turgut Özal. The RPP has always pointed out the risks of politicization of religion, spread of anti-republican ideas and repression of personal autonomy through these orders, and advocated a strict subordination of all religious activities to the Directorate of Religious Affairs. Kılıçdaroğlu initiated a reevaluation of religious orders as a legitimate part of public life while their involvement in politics was still criticized. In a conversation with journalists in early 2011 about his intervention to party members shouting "let's save the youth from religious orders (*tarikat*)" during his speech, he reportedly told:

> "Tarik" means "road". That is the road in one's heart, one's belief. We respect everyone's beliefs. It is not politician's job to question beliefs. It is necessary to keep faiths out of politics. People with certain beliefs can come together. We must respect that. The spiritual world should not be brought into politics. Let no one come between Allah and his subject. Saying such things inappropriately will cause harm, not benefit, to political parties (Sarıkaya, 2011).

The RPP's Civil Society Report published in May 2011 confirmed this novelty. In the section entitled "Faith-based Organizations", faith-based networks and associations were defined as an important element of civil society in Turkey, carrying out important activities that improve social solidarity, prevent isolation and loneliness of individuals, and help them to reach spiritual satisfaction. The report nevertheless distinguished between such organizations which have been acting just like other democratic NGOs, and those deviated from the essential aims of consolidating democracy and developing a healthy civil society that consists of

free and autonomous individuals. This second group is blamed for turning into simple extensions of government, focusing on profit-oriented activities, involvement in corruption, performing and spreading authoritarian and patriarchal values, and fostering prejudice about certain sections of society. Yet, no punitive measures against them were mentioned (CHP, 2011: 15).

While Kılıçdaroğlu reduced the weight of secularism in the discourse of the party, the meaning attached to the term has also changed. Uysal observes an early discursive shift in the 2011 election manifesto, in which the "emphasis on personal liberty replaced the primary emphasis on secularism that characterized both the 2007 and 2009 CHP election manifestos. In fact, in the 2011 manifesto, secularism is not mentioned as a principle until page 18" (Uysal, 2011: 135). Since then, secularism has been increasingly defined as the assurance of freedom of faith and worship. In a TV interview broadcasted in 2016 Kılıçdaroğlu stressed that secularism was not irreligiousness. He said they were open to studying and implementing different examples of secularism around the world; "in the end, if no one in this country is marginalized because of their faith and everyone can worship freely, there is no problem for us". He offered a definition of secularism as the neutrality of the state in its relations with citizens of different religious/sectarian beliefs, and as an assurance of respecting all beliefs. Such a minimal definition made him to even refer to the Ottoman Empire, supposing the Ottomans have had some sort of a secular order because they did not force people to accept Islam and intervene in people's daily lives. In parallel, he argued that respecting one's belief and worship was not only required by secularism but also by Islam. Nevertheless, he differentiated between Wahhabi Islamic mentality and Anatolian Sufi Islam, and argued that while the former was monolithic, intolerant, and violent, the latter allowed various interpretations of Islam and was built on love and tolerance. Secularism was deemed necessary to protect Anatolian Islam from the infiltration of an alien Islamic culture (CHP, 2016).

Although references to Anatolian Islam are not new, addressing freedom of faith and worship as the essence of secularism, and referring to religious sources for the justification of secularism is a radical departure from the party's earlier secularist outlook. By defining secularism as the neutrality of the state towards religion for the sake of human rights, Kılıçdaroğlu associated secularism with justice and democracy. According to Yavuz and Öztürk, he also prioritized reason and science as a second dimension of his understanding of secularism but, rather than a superior positivist principle, it was embedded in a meritocratic framework. He stated that prioritizing reason and science guarantees that competence would be the decisive factor in job recruitment and in the conduct of public affairs (Yavuz and Öztürk, 2023: 86-87).

The subsection entitled "A Libertarian Secularism That Respects Faiths" in the election manifesto of 2018 is a symbolic manifestation of this new conceptualization. It starts with the sentence "We will implement the principle of secularism, which is the most fundamental guarantee of freedom of belief and worship, with a libertarian understanding." This short part, placed under "Social

Peace, Kurdish Question" section, mainly promises equal treatment of religious minorities, namely Alevis and non-Muslim minorities. An ambiguous promise of keeping religion and politics separate and not allowing the instrumentalization of politics exists but there is no operationalized policy promise in the text regarding where to draw the boundaries of religion in public affairs (CHP, 2018).

This discursive shift complements Kılıçdaroğlu's strategy of turning the RPP into a catch-all party, which appeals to various sections of the electorate and can engage in political alliances. The new RPP's systematic rather than sporadic recruitment of conservative figures is an important part of this strategy. The constitutional amendment that introduced the election of president by popular vote, provided the motivation and justification for the nomination of conservative candidates in cooperation with other parties. Nomination of Mansur Yavaş, a nationalist conservative politician from the Nationalist Movement Party, in 2014 local elections for Ankara Metropolitan Municipality Mayor, was followed by the presidential candidate in the summer of the same year (Emre, 2015). The candidacy of Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, former Secretary-General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and a historian of science focused on Ottoman-Islamic civilization, showed the RPP's "willingness to reach out to conservative voters and eschew a polarizing debate on the role of Islam in Turkish politics" (Selçuk and Hekimci, 2020: 1501).

These earlier appearances of the pursuit of electoral alliance with conservative parties and recruitment of conservative politicians reached a new level with the transition to presidential system of government in 2017. The new system introduced the threshold of %50 plus one vote in one of two rounds to be elected as president. Simple majority rule, together with a great executive power and a fixed term in office, makes the presidential election a winner-takes-all race, which forced the RPP to build political coalitions to avoid getting stuck on a state of "perennial opposition" (Esen and Gumuscu, 2018: 50). Constitutional amendment was also accompanied by changes in the electoral law which allowed parties to form official pre-electoral alliances in the parliamentary elections so that they can exceed the 10% electoral threshold (later reduced to 7% in 2022). In this context, two major alliances were born in June 2018 parliamentary elections. While the JDP allied with the Nationalist Movement Party as the "People's Alliance", the RPP, the nationalist Good Party, the Islamist Felicity Party and the centre-right Democratic Party formed the "Nation Alliance".

Alliance formation requires setting aside differences, which was particularly hard for the Nation Alliance, consisting of parties with very different positions on a range of matters from economy to foreign policy (Başkan et al., 2022). Constituent parties nominated their own candidates in the presidential elections, also held in June 2018. The RPP nominated Muharrem İnce. Although İnce preferred to focus on such matters as authoritarianism, socio-economic problems, corruption, and reckless foreign policy, and he seemed to have diverged from the RPP's nationalist rhetoric (Esen and Yardimci-Geyikci, 2020), his style and background made him a conventional RPP candidate appealing to the secularist

electorate. He received 30,64% of the votes, and the opposition failed to take the race into the second round.

2019 local elections have been a milestone for the Nation Alliance and especially for the RPP's perception about the prospects for defeating Erdoğan. After the success of the RPP candidates supported by the Nation Alliance in metropoles, Kılıçdaroğlu engaged in the task of expanding the alliance and guiding it towards nominating a common presidential candidate in the 2023 elections. The Six Party Talks that started in early 2022 brought the RPP together with two splinter parties led by Ahmet Davutoğlu and Ali Babacan, former JDP leaders who served as prime minister and minister. The search for such an alliance forced the RPP to turn a blind eye to its allies' disliked attitudes about the proper place of religion in public affairs, and to build the rapprochement on the basis of restoration of democracy and the rule of law.

In the meantime, in order to reach out to the conservative sections of society, political figures with an Islamist right wing background such as Mehmet Bekaroğlu were invited and given important roles like vice-chairman in the party, which further transformed the party from inside. Similarly, some party members whose styles and backgrounds would fit well into this new strategy were allowed to rise in the party and to cross some lines regarding the representation of Islam in the public sphere. A special emphasis should be placed on Ekrem İmamoğlu, who run for the office of İstanbul Metropolitan Mayor in 2019 and had a hard-won victory. During his campaign, İmamoğlu had carefully avoided the cultural war between secularism and Islamism, and displayed his religious background in various occasions, e.g., when he successfully recited Quran in a mosque for the Muslims killed in terror attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand (Demiralp and Balta, 2021: 14). After he was elected, he also had Quran recited in his office during his inauguration and announced it on Twitter. Gürpınar argues that İmamoğlu's "political image as a more nonpartisan figure was an effort to dissociate the CHP from the stigma of its traditional (rigid, secular) identity politics" (Gürpınar, 2022).

All these trends culminated in the policy of "*helalleşme*" (which means mutual forgiveness for previous mistakes in Islamic terminology), or the "conservative opening" as it is usually defined in the media (Independent Türkçe, 2022). Within this framework, the RPP organized meetings all around the country with opinion leaders "close to the conservative world or center-right politics", encouraging criticism and a sincere communication about the distance between the party and the conservative electorate. When referring to these meeting Kılıçdaroğlu said "Sometimes I tease them; you call yourself conservative, but you are not conservative. I say, 'We were the real conservatives, we resisted change for years.'" He regrets that the RPP looked down on the people and hence led to the misconception that the party was irreligious. On the one hand, he emphasized that institutions cannot have religions and that they were committed to the protection of the principle of secularism, which is a precondition for democracy. Nevertheless, he also reminded that it was the RPP that established the Presidency of Religious Affairs and opened the first imam-hatip schools and theology faculties in

republican history. He rejected a polarization on the basis of right-left spectrum and defined the political divide between those who are in favor of democracy and those who are in favor of authoritarian regime (T24, 2020).

Within the framework of *helalleşme*, the RPP particularly addressed communities and individuals who were regarded as victims of rigid secular practices during the February 28 process, and sought a collective healing by acknowledging mistakes (Yavuz and Öztürk, 2023: 101-104). With a special emphasis on the unfair exclusion of women with headscarves from universities, Kılıçdaroğlu stated that he was determined to close the open wounds no matter what it costs, because it was the only way to end the hostilities between different sections of the society and to move forward. In a video posted on Twitter in September 2022, he told that they have made mistakes in the past but also have known how to change. He asked his companions if they were with him in this difficult road to reconciliation in Turkey, and announced that they would present a bill in the parliament that legally guarantees women's right to dress as they wish, in order to completely remove the headscarf issue from being a topic of political discussion (Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, 2022). This initiative has finalized and symbolized the radical change in the RPP in the last thirteen years under Kılıçdaroğlu's leadership.

CONCLUSION

Since Kılıçdaroğlu took over the leadership in 2010, the RPP has gradually shifted the axis of opposition to the JDP governments from their anti-secularism to socio-economic problems and authoritarianism. Moreover, the party also explicitly pursued a libertarian approach to secularism embodied in the withdrawal of objections to headscarf ban, an accommodative stance towards religious orders, a systematic recruitment of conservative figures, an electoral alliance with conservative parties, and an apologetic attitude towards the conservative sections of the society.

In the article, significant moments in the process of the adoption of this new approach by the RPP were analyzed. Under the light of the party change literature, particularly the works of Panebianco (1988) and Harmel and Janda (1994), one internal and two external factors for change were identified. First is leadership change. Kılıçdaroğlu has engaged in strategic and ideational changes to consolidate his power, coupled with his ambitious aim of turning the party into a catch-all party that can reach out to the conservative electorate. Electoral success has outweighed policy purity and advocacy as a primary party goal. Besides, two external factors provided the stimuli for change. The growing appeal of post-secularism on the one hand, and the transition to presidential system in Turkey on the other, have made the RPP reassess the effectiveness of its commitment to classical secularism in meeting the party goal. Post-secularism refers to the idea and practice of a new balance between citizenship and difference, allowing a greater space for religious arguments and images in the public sphere. This trend has had a special impact in countries like Turkey where the secular-religious cleavage has historically been significant. The second external factor is the

transition to presidential system, which both forced and facilitated the RPP's search for electoral alliances, even with splinter parties led by former JDP leaders, in a personalized winner-takes-all game.

Whether this new approach regarding the boundaries of religion in the public sphere is a persistent change or not is worth asking. In order to foresee the leaning of the party in the near future, a possible backlash should be taken into consideration. The growing presence and impact of religion in public affairs (See Adak, 2021; Çitak, 2020; Kaya, 2015) might create a backflow that ends up with a strong return of the idea of old-school secularism in and around the party. Secular-leaning sections of society complain about religious orders' heavy hand on the children and young adults living in their dorms, escalating violence against women, as well as the grip of conservative climate on arts and culture. Social Democracy Foundation survey in 2020 shows that 61,5% of the RPP electorate thinks that secularism is in danger. The three fields that secularism is considered in most danger are the functioning of state, women's rights and education (SODEV, 2020). Defining secularism as a procedural pluralist principle rather than a moral/philosophical one might seem unconvincing to many RPP voters. In a recent case, for example, Kılıçdaroğlu has received much reaction in the social media for not speaking against religious orders, after a university student committed suicide leaving a video in which he speaks about his concerns for the future and his distress arising from being forced to live in a dormitory of a religious order (Cumhuriyet, 2022). As Uğur-Çınar and Açıkgöz (2023: 623) states, secularism might be regarded by some sections of the social democratic opposition as a bulwark against discrimination on the basis of sexual identity and as a guarantee of a modern education, freedom, meritocracy and democracy.

It is nevertheless hard to claim that the RPP leadership strongly feels under counter pressure on this topic, which also explains Kılıçdaroğlu's insistence on this new approach to secularism despite the lack of any electoral success with the exception of 2019 local elections. Kılıçdaroğlu's strategy seems to have resonated in the party electorate and members. That the urban secular voters at times express their feeling of discontent with anti-secularism does not mean that secularism is a source of political mobilization for this group. Since the Republican Rallies of spring 2007 against the possible candidacy of an Islamic-oriented politician for presidency, or to a lesser extent the massive Gezi Park protests in summer 2013, there has not been any secularist mobilization. It is plausible to assume that hegemonic arguments about the cultural limits to secularization in Turkey and the expectation of countering the JDP in the polls by getting the conservatives onside have dominated the secular mindset. According to a study by Emre et al. (2018) much of the party rank-and-file states that the RPP was wrong in ignoring economic problems and in adopting a prohibitive attitude in the issue of headscarf ban on the grounds of a secular/modern/republican identity (Emre et al., 2018). The intellectual hegemony of post-secularism in Turkey also seems standing. There is a growing challenge against what is called "post-Kemalism," referring to the dominant paradigm in the study of Turkish politics that holds a bureaucratic, statist,

positivist trajectory of modernization responsible for all major problems of Turkish democracy (Aytürk and Esen, 2022). However, this trend has not been accompanied by a questioning of the main premises of post-secularity thesis (See Özdikmenli Çelikoğlu, 2020). Finally, the presidential system, which promotes de-ideologization and coalition-building, continues. These factors must be taken into consideration in foreseeing the future leaning of the RPP.

In the recent party congress Kılıçdaroğlu suffered a defeat but the odds are against the possibility of a major revision in the party's post-secular approach. Among Kılıçdaroğlu's opponents, only some weaker candidates have voiced criticism against the post-secular attitude. Winner of the race, Özgür Özel, who is supported by the İstanbul Metropolitan Mayor İmamoğlu, is not expected to question the legacy of Kılıçdaroğlu on this subject. In this regard, Kılıçdaroğlu is facing the consequences of his very policy of shifting the focus to vote maximization and making it a major criterion of success. His strategy and ideas are likely to outlive his leadership.

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