

Article

Islamic Populism in Turkey

Esen Kirdiş

International Studies, Rhodes College, Memphis, TN 38112, USA; kirdise@rhodes.edu

Abstract: In the last two decades, multiple Islamic parties have become incumbent parties and/or joined coalition governments. Such a development brought debate as to whether these parties could moderate into democratic actors à la Christian Democratic Parties in Western Europe, or whether they were aiming at the formation of an Islamist state and society through electoral means. What remains relatively unaddressed in the literature, however, is to what degree Islamic parties truly derive their socio-political agenda from Islam. Hence, this paper will ask, how do Islamic parties utilize Islam? To answer this question, this paper will use a single case-study approach to test and to rethink Islamic political parties and what is “Islamic” about them in the Turkish case. This paper will study the Turkish case because the country’s incumbent party, the Justice and Development Party (JDP), has been governing Turkey since 2002, making the Party the longest ruling Islamic party still in power. Based on the literature on populism, this paper will argue that the way the JDP utilized Islam can be characterized as populism flavored by religion that is based on (i) a thin theological foundation, (ii) a majoritarian rather than a multivocal interpretation of Islam, and (iii) a Muslim unity rhetoric.

Keywords: Islamic parties; populism; Turkey



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1. Introduction

In the last two decades, multiple Islamic parties, parties that make “explicit appeals to religious constituencies [. . . and have . . .] significant religious factions [. . .] within the party” (Ozzano and Cavatorta 2013, p. 800), became incumbent parties and/or joined coalition governments. Such a development initiated a debate as to whether these parties could moderate into democratic actors à la Christian Democratic Parties in Western Europe (Schwedler 2011; Brocker and Künkler 2013; Yavuz 2009), or whether they were “wolves in sheep clothing”, aiming at the formation of an Islamist state and society through electoral means (Hale 2005; Bashirov and Lancaster 2018; Tibi 2008; Kirdiş 2018). What remains relatively unaddressed in the literature, however, is to what degree Islamic parties truly derive their socio-political agenda from Islam. Hence, this paper will ask, *how do Islamic parties utilize Islam?* It will question how much Islamic parties consult religious texts (theology), lived Muslim experiences, and Islamic history in their political actions. Throughout the paper, this study will use the term “Islamic” rather than “Islamist” in order to differentiate between fundamentalist “Islamist” groups and other “Islamic” groups that come from a multiplicity of Islam interpretations.

Understanding how Islamic parties utilize Islam is an important topic to discuss politically because it is at the heart of the debate about identifying to what extent Islamic parties’ socio-political goals are informed by religion, and how Islamic parties mobilize their constituency around religion. It also is an important question to ask methodologically because extant literature treats religion as an independent variable looking at its effects on Islamic parties’ socio-political choices. Instead, this paper will treat religion as a dependent variable looking at how Islamic parties understand religion. To do so, this paper will utilize a single case-study approach (Lijphart 1971) to test and to rethink Islamic political parties and what is “Islamic” about them in the Turkish case. This paper will investigate the Turkish case because the country’s incumbent party, the Justice and Development Party

(JDP), has been ruling the country since 2002, making the Party the longest governing Islamic party still in power.

In order to address these issues, this paper will build on the theoretical framework developed by the literature on populism in Europe (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2011; Taggart 2000; Jones 2007; Heinisch 2003; Arter 2010; Pankowski 2010) and in Latin America (Weyland 2001; March 2007; Roberts 2006, 2007; Gidron and Bonikowski 2013). Nonetheless, there is no agreement in the literature on what populism is. While some scholars studying European far right parties define populism as an “ideational approach”, seeing populism as an eclectic accumulation of ideas and ideologies used to represent an imagined majority (Mudde 2004; Pankowski 2010), others studying Latin American experiences understand populism as a “discursive style” distinguished by its rhetoric rather than by its political identity (Hawkins 2009). The disagreements do not stop there, however, as scholars also diverge on how leaders utilize populism. Whereas some scholars define populism as a “political strategy” used by personalistic leaders to create closer relations with the electorate (Weyland 2001), others define populism as a “style” that populist leaders perform and enact across different socio-political contexts in order to confront the elites (Moffitt 2017). Following Yilmaz and Morieson’s discussion on how all four approaches to populism can integrate religion, this study will adapt “the most widely used minimal definition” of populism (Yilmaz and Morieson 2021, p. 12), namely Mudde’s definition of populism that “considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2004, p. 543).

Considering this definition, this paper will test three populist characteristics identified by the literature. Firstly, it will test the hypothesis that populist parties are ideologically “thin” in that they do not offer systematic solutions to the day’s often structural and long-term problems beyond claiming that the solution lies in the “will of the people” to reign supreme (Hawkins et al. 2012). Secondly, it will test the hypothesis that populist parties see politics as a contention between the good-willed majority of people versus power-hungry elites (Mudde 2004), and thus adapt both an anti-elitist and yet also an anti-pluralistic agenda in their prioritization of an ideologically uniform imagined majority. Thirdly, it will test the hypothesis that populist parties often use demagoguery by entertaining commonly held prejudices and simplistic explanations from public discourse rather than offering a nuanced take on the day’s problems, and by doing so, deepen extant polarizations and thus create unity within their constituency (Mudde 2004). Based on this literature on populism, this paper will argue that the way the JDP in Turkey utilized Islam may be characterized as populism flavored by religion that is based on (i) a thin theological foundation, (ii) a majoritarian rather than a multivocal interpretation of Islam, and (iii) a Muslim unity rhetoric.

It should be noted here that there is a growing scholarship on the JDP and its populism (Arat-Koç 2018; Bozkurt 2013; Demiralp 2018; Dinçşahin 2012; Kirdiş and Drhimeur 2016; Rogenhofer and Panievsky 2020; Yilmaz 2015; Yilmaz et al. 2021a). The Party’s populism has manifested itself in its development policies (Kutlay and Karaoguz 2018), foreign policy (Başkan 2018; Sezal and Sezal 2018; Ozpek and Yasar 2018), and historical narratives (Palabiyik 2018; Çınar 2018). What differentiates this study from the extant literature, nevertheless, is that it aims to understand how Islamic parties utilize Islam rather than how they utilize populism. Hence, this paper questions the role of theology, lived Muslim experiences, and Islamic history in the political agenda of the JDP.

To illustrate these points, the rest of the paper will proceed in five parts. While the next part will delineate the theoretical framework of this study, the following three parts will discuss the JDP and its use of Islamic populism empirically. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the political implications of its findings for contemporary politics and the study of religious populism.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

How much do Islamic parties consult religious texts (theology) in their political actions? Although they are defined as parties with religio-political ideals and goals, Islamic parties are not necessarily parties that engage in theological discussions. As a matter of fact, Islamic parties are formed by Islamic movements that often bypass theological discussions in favor of pragmatism. Foremost, the decision to form a political party (or not) is a critical moment for Islamic movements and their possible transformations: while Islamic parties agree to play by the rules of the regime and thus to open themselves up to change by external factors, Islamic movements eschewing party politics are resisting such change in their refusal to participate in existing institutional structures (Kirdiş 2019). Hence, Islamic movements that form political parties are those which see party politics as a chance to broaden their mass appeal beyond their ideological niche and through their access to state resources as members of the parliament (Kirdiş 2019).

The inclusion-moderation literature traces how such ambitious Islamic parties “moderate” into more open-minded and pragmatic actors (Schwedler 2011) as they are “included” in party system and compete in elections (Brocker and Künkler 2013). To do so, the literature looks at (1) the influence of external and internal factors on moderation, such as the influence of institutional constraints (Buehler 2013; Driessen 2012; Somer 2014) and the influence of leadership change (Brocker and Künkler 2013; Sanchez-Cuenca 2004), (2) the meanings of moderation (Schwedler 2011; Browers 2016; Tezcür 2009; Wegner and Pellicer 2009), and (3) the processes of moderation (Tepe 2012). Within this framework, extant literature also looks at alternative modes of Islamist transformation, such as how repression may lead to moderation (Hamid 2011; Wickham 2004), and at how socio-economic transformations in the society impact moderation (Nasr 2009; Sokhey and Yildirim 2013). The literature also focuses on different types of moderation. In particular, the literature differentiates between “behavioral” and “ideological” moderation (Schwedler 2011). Behavioral moderation defines a moderation process where Islamic parties, as strategic vote/influence seekers, downplay their ideological convictions by using more moderate, that is more widely accepted and uncontroversial, framing that appeals to a broader audience, to the median voter in particular (Schwedler 2011). In contrast, ideological moderation refers to a process wherein Islamic parties embrace liberal democratic values as they gain experience within party politics, interact with opposition parties, and learn to make concessions (Schwedler 2011).

Regardless of whether they moderate behaviorally or ideologically, Islamic parties first and foremost need to accommodate extant powerholders in the country to succeed in party politics (Tezcür 2009). Such accommodation either means calming down secular fears over an Islamist takeover, or signaling to a monarch with Islamic titles their loyalty and acceptance of such titles (Kirdiş 2018). What this often indicates in practice is that Islamic parties moderate their public presentations by downplaying their Islamic credentials by getting rid of Islamic terminology in their party programs and statements (Schwedler 2011). In addition to accommodating major institutional players, Islamic parties also aim to appeal to an electorate beyond their niche base to succeed in party politics. While religiosity may be prevalent in a country, voters often cast votes for non-religious reasons, such as socio-economic policies that a party proposes (Kurzman and Türkoğlu 2015). Meanwhile, although religious texts often propose ideas on governance, such as social justice and economic equality, they rarely specify a path to implement them. Therefore, Islamic parties often borrow from other ideologies, such as from capitalism or socialism, and pursue an ideologically eclectic socio-political agenda (Kirdiş and Drhimeur 2016). As a result, similar to populist parties of a secular nature, Islamic parties’ Islam understanding remains “thin-centered” (Mudde 2004) without a coherent plan (Hawkins et al. 2012) as it aims to appeal to a diverse audience (Weyland 2001) while accommodating extant powerholders in the country. Thus, considering these discussions, this paper’s first proposition is:

Proposition 1. *Islamic parties tend to utilize a theologically thin understanding of Islam in their political actions.*

How much do Islamic parties consult lived Muslim experiences in their political actions? Although Islamic parties are “thin” in their Islam understanding and pragmatists in attaining political power through institutional means, they also are in a sense “subversive parties” with long-term aims of socio-political transformations (Hamid 2014). In this, they often see themselves as the vanguards of a marginalized majority, a majority not divided by ethnicity or socio-economic class but rather an accumulation of pious Muslims who have been barred from decision-making by Westernized and secularized elites (Kirdiş and Drhimeur 2016). In this, similar to their populist counterparts elsewhere, Islamic parties believe that politics has come under this Westernized elite’s control who are unrepresentative of the majority of people (Canovan 2002), and that these elites are conspiring with global interest groups against what is in the interest of the people (Hawkins 2009). Hence, anti-elitism forms the basis of their religio-political discourse.

Such anti-elitist sentiments, however, risk empowering majoritarian policies when Islamic parties finally come into power after decades of fighting to be part of decision-making. Considering such aims to represent a majority against elitism, in power, Islamic parties often engage in cultural hegemony building and social engineering through state institutions to represent the will of the people/majority (Kirdiş 2018). However, because of such a majoritarian view on politics, Islamic parties may also fail to account for the pluralism within the pious majority they claim to represent, and thus undermine the diversity within the pious. After all, there is no one way to be a pious Muslim. While some Muslims aim to live like the followers of Prophet Mohammed, Islamic feminists call to reexamine those early years; and while some Islamists engage in violent jihad transnationally, others interpret jihad to take place within oneself and thus withdraw from public life to focus on their salvation. Such multivocality (Stepan 2000) within the Muslim community, however, remains unaddressed in a populist interpretation of Islam focused on representing a marginalized majority. Hence, this paper’s second proposition is:

Proposition 2. *Islamic parties tend to utilize a majoritarian rather than a multivocal interpretation of Islam in their political actions.*

How much do Islamic parties consult Islamic history in their political actions? While Islamic parties’ thin-centered and majoritarian understanding of Islam may allow them to gain political power, being an incumbent also represents several dilemmas for them. Firstly, as Islamic parties become powerholders, they themselves become elites, or at least their party leaders and their allies in business and civil society do. Thus, the populist claim that the majority has been shut out by elites in power becomes an inconsistent claim. Furthermore, the formation of such an Islamic elite has the potential to undermine the electoral success and socio-political appeal of Islamic parties as the problems of the country are associated with these new Islamic elites, and as these parties now must deal with the country’s deep-seated problems as incumbents. This situation also creates a dilemma for the voters who support such parties as well as the majoritarian beliefs that underlie such parties’ political agenda in that it becomes clear that having a “majority” in power or having the majority’s solutions put in action does not necessarily solve a country’s deep-seated structural problems.

Meanwhile, relying on existing prejudices, simplistic explanations from public discourse (Mudde 2004), and age-old tropes of directing the blame for the country’s crises on “foreign powers” and their “domestic conspirators,” may help incumbent populist parties with all these dilemmas. Foremost, such an act creates solidarity between the party leaders, the new elites, and their constituents as common beliefs are taken as the basis of action by the party leadership and unites them against “others” who are trying to undermine the majority and prevent their representatives from becoming successful at a global stage. Furthermore, it diverts blame away from the incumbent party’s failures and the country’s

crises by offering a simple antagonistic explanation that already is embraced by a majority and does not necessitate new policies that are long-term and difficult to implement. In the case of Islamic parties, such blaming of foreign powers and their domestic conspirators is both an overly simplistic approach and also one that has historical basis given the history of Western imperialism and neoliberalism in the Muslim world. Hence, such rhetoric blaming foreign powers for the ills the country and its people endure serves to create solidarity abroad as the country and its people see themselves as part of a transnational Muslim community, and thus at home as the voters of a particular party. After all, foreign policy communicates to voters a narrative about the nation and its leaders (Browning 2013). By redefining and reframing the international level, parties can define who they are, what they stand for, and whom they represent domestically (Kirdiş 2015). Lastly, such a framing may also allow Islamic parties to both represent themselves as victims of foreign interest groups as well as a united resistance against them. Hence, in a sense, Islamic parties may take populism's "good people" versus "evil elites" (Mudde 2004) international. Thus, the last proposition of this paper is:

Proposition 3. *Islamic parties tend to utilize a pragmatic Muslim unity rhetoric in their political actions.*

The next three sections will discuss these three propositions empirically by examining the JDP in Turkey.

3. A Thin Theology

Whether the JDP is an Islamic party or not is a contentious debate. On the one hand, the JDP was formed by a younger generation of politicians who split from the National View Movement (*Millî Görüş Hareketi*), a movement that formed multiple openly Islamic parties in Turkey, to become a center-right party by leaving political Islam behind. On the other hand, JDP's "politics [is] very much derived from Islamic life-styles" (Yavuz 2009, p. 5) in that the visibility and reach of religious institutions, such as the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) and religious schools (*Imam-Hatips*), and religious non-state actors, such as religious businesses catering to Islamic elites, increased exponentially under the JDP incumbency. Today, the JDP is a party promoting religio-conservative values and identities.

Such complexity has its origins in the JDP's mother movement, the National View Movement (NOM). The NOM was formed in the 1960s under the leadership of the Nakşibendi Order, an Islamic order sidelined by the new secular democratic order, and pious parliamentarians marginalized by and within center-right parties (Kirdiş 2019). Idealizing the country's Ottoman past and aiming to bring back religion into the conversation, the NOM entered party politics in 1970 (Kirdiş 2019). According to Yildiz, the NOM was a "religious nationalist" movement aiming to engage religious constituents rather than driving "politics in the name of religion" (Yildiz 2003), and evolved in response to the secular (laic) state establishments (Yildiz 2006). Over the years, it has formed multiple parties, almost all of which were shut down for un-secularism by the Turkish Constitutional Court. In those years, the NOM, on the one hand, criticized Turkey's laicism and Westernization, and advocated for a new economic system called the "Just Order" based on Islamic finance (Erbakan 1991). On the other hand, however, NOM parties also joined coalitions with secular parties whenever they got the chance to do so and showed great ideological flexibility as circumstances changed. For instance, the NOM's National Salvation Party joined a coalition with the center-left Republican People's Party in 1974, and the next year with the center-right Justice Party (1975–1977). What was missing in all these crucial decisions to enter party politics or to enter coalitions was a theological discussion over whether such political moves were justified.

By the 1990s, the NOM was at another critical juncture point: some younger leaders within the NOM realized they could attain electoral success if they pragmatically watered down their Islamism (Yavuz 2009). Other factors, such as changes in the socio-economic

bases of Islamism (Öniş 1997; Gumuscu 2010), institutional constraints (Mecham 2004; Tepe 2012), and political learning (Çavdar 2006; Yavuz 2009; Turam 2007), amongst others were equally influential in this decision. Hence, the NOM doubled down on its grassroots activism and downplayed its Islamic references to escape the laic tutelage in Turkey. When the old guards within the NOM resisted such changes and blocked the rise of a younger generation into leadership positions, a generational split within the NOM led to the formation of the JDP in 2001. In the words of a JDP ideologue, “this [was] a choice. Either you remain marginal and your quantity remains limited or your quantities increase while your quality decreases” (Kirdiş 2016, p. 428). Hence in its early years, this new party claimed to have shifted from its “old claim that Turkey was not religious enough to the claim that Turkey was not democratic enough” (Mecham 2004, p. 346).

In power, the JDP utilized eclectic and at times inherently contradictory ideologies to appeal to multiple constituents and to consolidate its electoral success. While the Party’s program situated the Party as a conservative party aiming to represent “the people” in a new era of Turkish politics (AKP 2003), its economic policies “continued the neoliberal structural adjustments (IMF) program of its predecessors, engaged in mass privatization efforts, [and] increased foreign direct investment” (Kirdiş and Drhimeur 2016, p. 605). Furthermore, while the Party employed welfare policies aiming to help the poor, it also “subcontract[ed] the state’s welfare provision duties to the private sector” (Bozkurt 2013, p. 374). In doing so, the Party “combine[d] commitments to neoliberalism with making disproportionate welfare services available to the ‘people’” (Rogenhofer and Panievsky 2020, p. 1396). Meanwhile, the leaders of the party presented themselves as “of the people” by posing at slums at Ramadan dinners and their old neighborhoods. By doing so, the Party, according to Demiralp, “was able to simultaneously harness the interests of its two key constituencies: party allies in the private sector and lower-income citizens” (Demiralp 2018, p. 91). All in all, as various scholars have pointed out, the JDP combined various ideologies as an incumbent ranging from nationalism, Islamism, and conservatism (Tas 2020; Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018). In foreign policy, the Party sought EU membership and adapted liberal democratic policies but also advocated for Muslim unity against Western imperialism. In short, JDP’s Islam understanding was not motivated by theological discussions around what policies to promote and political paths to take, but rather by Islamic populism thin in its theology and pragmatist in its political agenda.

4. A Majoritarian Interpretation

While pragmatism rather than theological discussions brought the JDP electoral success, it was its call to represent a marginalized majority that consolidated its base (Kirdiş and Drhimeur 2016). In particular, the Party situated itself as an alternative to the status-quo blaming Turkey’s economic woes on elitism, and proposed to build a “New Turkey,” where the military and judiciary take a backseat and where religion is more publicly visible (Keyman 2014). According to Dinçşahin, the Party “appealed to the masses with an anti-institutional discourse that divides society into ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’” (Dinçşahin 2012, p. 640). Hence, the Party engaged in reforms to minimize the role of the military and judiciary in its early years in office. The Party at the time even claimed that it was spearheading a “silent revolution” (AKP 2015a) to “bring the people’s voice into politics” (AKP 2015b). However, as the Party eliminated its “elite” contenders in the military and the judiciary and consolidated its reach within the state, it also started to see threats everywhere to its incumbency, referring to opposition parties as potential traitors (Al Jazeera 2017), using judicial means against its critics (Doğan and Rodrik 2014), and banning social media platforms on occasion (Freedom House 2021). Such polarizations reached their peak during the 2017 referendum that transformed Turkey’s parliamentary system into presidentialism when centralization of power consolidated. Those critical of such centralization were accused of being on the same side as terrorist organizations (T24 2017).

Such majoritarianism also manifested itself in the Party's policies. While the JDP in its early years was focused on economic reforms and EU membership, its incumbency became "more interested in pursuing top-down policies aimed to administer the demands of a moral majority" (Kirdiş 2018, p. 906). Firstly, the Directorate of Religious Affairs, the *Diyanet*, a state sponsored religious establishment that represents Sunni Islam and oversees the education and appointment of imams as well as the administration of mosques all over Turkey, grew exponentially under the JDP. As the *Diyanet*'s budget expanded to \$2 billion in the last decade under the JDP (Öztürk 2016), by 2020, its budget surpassed the budgets of the various ministries including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Strateji ve Bütçe Başkanlığı 2019). Moreover, the *Diyanet* used the weekly Friday sermons to popularize the JDP's civilizational discourse (Yılmaz et al. 2021a).

Secondly, like the *Diyanet*, religious education grew under the JDP as the Party announced its desire to raise a "pious generation" (Radikal 2012). By restructuring the education system, the Party strengthened Imam-Hatip schools, vocational schools designed to educate personnel for state-run religious establishments. By 2019, of Imam-Hatip high schools and students grew from 536 schools with 64,534 students in 2002 (Gür 2019) to 5017 schools with 1.26 million students (Sosyal Demokrasi Vakfı (SODEV) 2019). According to Lukuslu, the JDP incumbency, by empowering religious education, aimed to create "a new myth of youth in Turkey: the myth of a pious generation, aimed at replacing the previous myth of a modern and national youth, prevalent in Turkey's political culture since the nineteenth century and reinforced by the Kemalist Republic" (Lüküslü 2016, p. 637). Religious education was also supported outside public schools when Islamic communities (*cemaat*) started opening up private schools and Islamic publishing houses catering to these schools grew (Kandiyoti and Emanet 2017).

Beyond the *Diyanet* and education, the JDP also engaged in policies aiming to support a moral majority. To this end, the Party halted theatre plays and art exhibitions because it found them to be "too vulgar"; introduced limits to alcohol sale (Kirdiş 2016); politicized reproductive issues, such as abortion, caesarean section, and encouragement to have three children (Hürriyet 2013); and withdrew from the Istanbul Convention protecting women against violence including domestic violence (Yalcinalp 2021). Furthermore, family policies were introduced "to transform it in line with neo-conservative principles" (Yılmaz 2015, p. 371). According to Arat-Koç, the cultural arena has also been hyper-politicized as "white Turk has been adopted as an identity by outspoken members of the media and business elite, whereas its binary opposite, Black Turk, has been appropriated by Islamist politicians of the Justice and Development Party as a metaphor to characterize the marginalization and purported oppression of their conservative Muslim constituency" (Arat-Koç 2018, p. 391).

While such policies promote conservative Sunni Islam and may even represent most Muslims in Turkey given the JDP's continued electoral success in the country, they fail to represent the multivocality of Muslim experiences in Turkey. Foremost, there is a secular backlash amongst the youth in Turkey. Recent polls conducted both by the *World Values Survey* (Inglehart et al. 2020) and by KONDA (KONDA Research and Consultancy Inc. 2019) show that the Turkish youth have become less religious and less likely to engage in religious rituals, such as fasting and mosque attendance, in the last decade. Even youth who define themselves as "religious" differ in their worldviews from the religio-political status quo promoted by the incumbent party. For instance, in the recent protests at Boğaziçi University, a group defining themselves as "Muslim students" announced their support for their peers and demanded a more pluralistic and progressive understanding of Islam (Cumhuriyet 2021b).

Beyond the youth, such majoritarian understanding of Islam fails to embrace the plurality of Islamic organizations in Turkey. While the JDP has close ties with several Islamic civil society organizations that support the Party, it has been hostile to those Islamic organizations critical of its incumbency. For instance, the "Anti-Capitalist Muslims," a small group that positions itself as a left-wing Islamic alternative to that of the JDP's neoliberal

capitalism, has organized Ramadan dinners on the streets of Istanbul as a challenge to the luxurious Ramadan dinners hosted by the JDP and attended by the leaders of Islamic businesses. Even though these were small gatherings, they were harassed by the police (Bianet 2019). Similarly, a prominent Islamic headscarf activist criticized the Diyanet for claiming to represent and acting in the name of the pious to undermine rights, including LGBTQ+ rights, and not paying attention to corruption, sexual assault at Quranic schools, and threats to free speech that are considered essential in Islam (T24 2020). Felicity Party, the party of the JDP forerunner National Outlook Movement, also became critical of the JDP's polarizing language (T24 2019b). Even though the Party gets less than 1% of the votes, they claim to have been asked by the incumbent party to withdraw their candidates (T24 2019a). To make a long story short, JDP's Islam understanding remained populist in its anti-elitism and tilted majoritarian, yet such majoritarianism was unrepresentative of the multivocality of the lived Muslim experiences in Turkey.

5. Rhetorical Muslim Unity

Over the last two decades the JDP has been in office, it has grown into a dominant party over four consecutive elections. Furthermore, with the EU reforms of the 2000s and several referendums, it has centralized power. The Party also consolidated its dominance as it withstood the 2013 Gezi Protests and the 2016 coup attempt. Meanwhile, a new elite has formed in Turkey, an Islamic elite, such as the businesses associated with the ruling party (Gürakar 2016), and civil society organizations that “periodically pledge their commitment to the government's political ideology in press releases” (Sarfati 2017, p. 405). The consolidation of an incumbent party that has been in power for twenty years is not surprising or unique to Turkey neither is the formation of a pro-government non-state sector under it. However, this poses a challenge for a party that grew as a critique of Turkey's elitism.

Firstly, there is widespread perception of corruption and nepotism. According to the latest World Values Survey (2017–2020) in Turkey (Inglehart et al. 2020), 38.8% of the respondents said that most/all state authorities are involved in corruption, and 66.2% placed the country's corruption above five “on a 10-point scale where ‘1’ means ‘there is no corruption in [my country]’ and ‘10’ means ‘there is abundant corruption in [my country]’.” Furthermore, there is increasing discontent with the socio-economic stagnancy amongst the population. According to KONDA surveys in 2018, 63% of the Turkish population said they “barely made ends meet,” and 43% said they have debt and struggle to pay it (KONDA Research and Consultancy Inc. 2018). Meanwhile, Islamic elites' lifestyles have come under scrutiny. For instance, recently a bureaucrat associated with the Party was caught on camera snorting cocaine in his luxury car (BBC News 2021) and another hosting a high-end baby shower gifting a newborn diamonds (HalkTV 2019). In short, there is a growing discontent with the rise of this new elite.

It is against this backdrop that a new foreign policy rhetoric based on Muslim unity has become more pronounced. While the JDP has been relatively more reconciliatory internationally during its first two terms, pushing for EU membership and greater engagement with the neighboring regions (Kirdiş 2015), starting with its third term, it became more focused on Muslim unity. For instance, then-Prime Minister and current-President Erdoğan, in his 2011 General Elections victory speech, announced that JDP's victory was the victory of the “oppressed” and that it was as “much of a victory for Istanbul as it is for Sarajevo, as much of a victory for Izmir as it is for Beirut, as much of a victory for Diyarbakir as it is for the West Bank and Gaza” and that “the winner today is not only Turkey but also the Middle East, Caucasia, and the Balkans” (T24 2011).

In the last decade since then and especially after the Arab Spring, the Party and its leaders' support for the Arab street became more pronounced as the Party saw itself as an example for the region (Başkan 2018; Çınar 2018; Sezal and Sezal 2018). This, however, also meant a more offensive foreign policy, especially in Syria and Libya, involving military affairs. Moreover, as the Arab Spring turned into Arab Winter and the JDP's domestic

problems grew with a stagnating economy. There is often the claim of “foreign interest lobbies” playing games over Turkey, a Muslim country, alluding to the colonial experience of half a century earlier in the Muslim world (NTVMSNBC 2013). Meanwhile, there has been greater emphasis on engaging in foreign aid distribution in Muslim countries (Celik and Emre 2016). Such an emphasis on Muslim unity has also coincided with rising problems for the Party, ranging from a deteriorating economy to the Syrian refugee crisis and its domestic repercussions. These problems, coupled with the Party’s increasing illiberalism, has made the “Muslim unity” rhetoric even more vital as it signaled to the electorate that the Party and its constituents are on the same side against domestic and external contenders, thereby reanimating the populist trope of “the good majority versus power-hungry elites.” All in all, the Party utilized a historically popular and populist rhetoric of Muslim unity against internal and external interest groups.

6. Conclusions

This paper asked how Islamic parties utilize Islam and questioned how much Islamic parties consult religious texts (theology), lived Muslim experiences, and Islamic history in their political actions. By studying theoretical literature on populism and the experiences of the JDP in Turkey, this paper argued that the way the JDP utilized Islam may be characterized as populism flavored by religion that is based on (i) a thin theological foundation, (ii) a majoritarian rather than a multivocal interpretation of Islam, and (iii) a Muslim unity rhetoric.

These findings contribute to the literature in three ways. Firstly, there is a growing literature on “religion and populism” and it goes beyond Turkey and the Muslim world (Yilmaz et al. 2021b). This paper, by discussing how populist characteristics identified by extant literature on populist parties in Western Europe and in Latin America can travel to a different context, aims to expand the scope of the literature on populism to non-Western settings. Secondly, this paper treated religion as a dependent variable rather than as an independent variable. What this meant is that it looked at how a political party affected religion rather than at how it is affected by it. This distinction is crucial to understand what is truly “Islamic” about Islamic political parties and what is instead a populist political tool to mobilize the masses. Thirdly, the findings of this paper can travel to different contexts with some alterations. For instance, similar to the JDP in Turkey, Modi’s BJP in India and Netanyahu’s Likud in Israel have built their religious populist discourse on a thin theological foundation combining neoliberal economic policies with welfare expansions, pursued a majoritarian rather than a multivocal interpretation of religion by pushing for religious polarizations, and called for religious unity to justify their attacks on independent media (Rogenhofer and Panievsky 2020).

While the utilization of populism has helped these leaders and their parties to create their own brand of religio-nationalist and illiberal political agenda, it also has created problems for them. For the JDP, these problems have become existential. Firstly, utilizing a thin theological foundation of Islam, the JDP appealed to voters beyond an ideological niche and thus was able to capture center-right voters who are not necessarily voting for religious reasons. However, such catch-all strategies (Blyth and Katz 2005) also meant that the Party had to satisfy multiple constituents continuously. Hence, over the years, some voters have left the JDP because of its increasing focus on morality politics, such as the liberals, a group of voters the Party relied on during its early years.

Secondly, a majoritarian interpretation of Islam consolidated party identification thereby establishing “enduring psychological attachments” (Shively 1972) between voters and the Party by claiming to represent a majority left out previously. Hence, according to a 2018 KONDA survey, 46% of the JDP voters vote for the Party because of its leader, 22% for ideological reasons, and 22% because they identify with the Party (Uncu 2018). Furthermore, 72% of the JDP voters said they would vote for the Party no matter what (Uncu 2018). Such dedicated following and the unity it brings has allowed the JDP to continuously succeed in elections. On the other hand, such majoritarian interpretations

have also alienated many potential voters in its illiberalism and thus undermining of pluralism. JDP's votes have been stagnant since the 2011 elections: while in 2011, 21.4 million people out of 52.8 million eligible voters voted for the JDP, in the 2018 elections, 21.3 million people out of 59.4 million eligible voters voted for the JDP (TUİK 2021). Recent polls also hint at a historic low for the Party: according to a December 2020 poll, the Party's votes have declined from 42.6% in the 2018 elections to 39.8% (Cumhuriyet 2021a). In other words, the JDP today is winning elections not necessarily because it is popular amongst the majority of the population as it once was in the 2000s, but because there is no strong opposition that can challenge the JDP electorally.

Thirdly, the Party's Muslim unity rhetoric and thus its foreign policy prioritizing a Muslim community has made the Party and its leader widely popular in the Arab world: 42% of the Arab world surveyed in the Arab Barometer evaluated Turkish President Erdogan's foreign policy as good/very good surpassing, Saudi and Iranian leaders (Kayyali 2021). However, it also has alienated many Arab leaders, who started seeing Turkey as a threat. More importantly, the costs of such a foreign policy have been detrimental in domestic politics as the Syrian refugee situation has remained unresolved and continues to be an issue of contention amongst the Turkish electorate regardless of their political affiliation. In short, Islamic populism has made the JDP electorally successful but also came at a cost.

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