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The Historical Transformation of the Religion–Politics Relationship in Türkiye Through the Prism of Its Media Representation During the 2023 Presidential Elections

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Abstract: This study aims to examine how religion in Türkiye, beyond having social value, has been instrumentalized by political parties into a power dynamic and explore the role of the media in this process. Adopting an inductive approach, the study first examines how the boundaries between religion and politics have changed over the years, despite the Republic of Türkiye being constitutionally defined as a secular state, using a qualitative historical method. Then, in order to explore the current reflections of this transformation, focus is placed on the most recent presidential election, held in 2023. News reports about a widely circulated photograph of opposition presidential candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu “stepping/standing” on a prayer rug, used by Muslims for worship, during his campaign are analyzed using the critical discourse analysis (CDA) method. The findings reveal that religion has become a significant component of political strategies and propaganda tools in Türkiye. Religious values and symbols function as powerful instruments, shaping societal perceptions through political discourse. As a hegemonic apparatus, the media reproduces religious discourse in line with ideological tendencies and mediates religion as a political tool.

Keywords: religion and politics; religious symbols; power; ideology; hegemonic power; secular state; propaganda; media discourse; critical discourse analysis



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1. Introduction

The relationship between religion and politics is complex and multidimensional, varying according to social, cultural, and historical contexts. Throughout history, many political leaders have used religion to legitimize their power (Eliade 1987; Smith 2009). While religion provides a moral framework that binds societies together, it also serves as a mechanism of control for political leaders over the populace (Durkheim 1912). The relationship between religion and politics should be approached carefully, considering both individual freedoms and social order. Academic studies in this field highlight potential outcomes and demonstrate that imbalances in this relationship can undermine the functioning of democratic order (Casanova 1994; Juergensmeyer 2008; Esposito 2011). In contemporary times, the role of religion in ensuring social order and cohesion is often exploited by political powers and politicoreligious groups to legitimize their discourses and gain social

approval (Fox 2016; Johnson 2019). Religious discourse is frequently used by politicians to consolidate power, especially in countries where religion plays a dominant role in public life and national identity (Huntington 1996). The instrumentalization of religion by political leaders can transform religion from a unifying force into a tool of polarization (Habermas 2006). Political leaders employ religious rhetoric to mobilize mass support, a tactic that is particularly effective during times of social unrest or political instability (Fox 2008). The interaction between religion and politics has grown even more complex with the rise of political parties that use religious rhetoric to gain political support (Williams 2020). In contemporary politics, religion is increasingly being utilized as a tool of identity politics (Casanova 1994). The media is one of the most important actors in political communication and constructs the political environment in line with its ideology. According to Teun Adrian van Dijk, ideologies are socially shared beliefs that are related to a group's characteristic features such as its identity, place in society, interests and goals, relations with other groups, reproduction, and natural environment (van Dijk 2003). According to Stuart Hall, what gives the media its ideological power is its "ability to define the situation" (Shoemer and Reese 1997). Communication institutions and relations today define and construct the social sphere and help to construct the political sphere (Hall 1997).

The relationship between religion and politics in Türkiye has been one of the most significant and contentious issues on the political agenda throughout the country's history. With the proclamation of the Republic, religion was pushed into the background in the political sphere and was separated from state affairs by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Türkiye. The Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP), established by Atatürk as Türkiye's first political party, emerged as a carrier of modernization and reform policies. The CHP ruled Türkiye as a single-party government for 27 years. Following Atatürk's era, the transition to a multi-party political system introduced a competitive environment in which electoral strategies aimed at addressing the suppressed religious expectations of the public gained prominence. In this context, the Democrat Party (Demokrat Parti, DP), which legitimized Islam and traditional values to garner the support of the "periphery", implemented significant changes in religious policies. This shift also marked the transfer of power from bureaucratic-political elites to commercial (economic) elites (Kongar 2006; Mardin 2006; Ahmad 2010; Koçak 2011). This situation, often described by theorists as a center-periphery conflict, persisted until the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) came to power in 2002. However, the AKP's rise to power marked a significant transformation in this traditional equation. With the AKP, the periphery seized the power of the center, reflecting previously suppressed religious practices in the public sphere and imposing its dominance in areas previously secularized by the elite (Bora 1999; Şahin 2012). In the Republic of Türkiye, the media's perspective on the relationship between religion and politics has often operated within the orbit of the ruling power (Alemdar 1988; Koloğlu 1992; Eroğul 2013; Topuz 2003). After coming to power, the AKP swiftly institutionalized its own media, weakened or forced changes in opposition media, and established a media environment vastly different from that in the past (Sözeri 2015). As a result of these policies, the AKP's control over traditional media increased significantly. The party's leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, assumed the authority to decide which news stories can or cannot be published, how they are framed, and which questions may or may not be asked (Feridunoğlu 2016; Saran 2014).

The interaction between religion and politics, mediated through the media, contributes to the consolidation of hegemonic powers, thereby strengthening and perpetuating dominant ideologies. This study, focusing on the relationship between religion and politics in Türkiye within the context of historical developments and transformations, is significant

for deeply analyzing the cultural and geographical context and contributing to the limited literature in this field. This research aims to examine how religion in Türkiye, beyond having social value, has been instrumentalized by political parties into a tool of political power and explores the role of the media in this process. Adopting an inductive approach, the study first investigates, through a qualitative historical method, the ambiguity of the evolving boundaries between religion and politics over the years, despite the Republic of Türkiye being constitutionally defined as a secular state. The historical background is elaborated in the following sections: “Religion and Politics During the Single-Party Era: Foundations of Secular Policies”, “Religion and Politics in the Multi-Party Era: Transformation of Religious Policies”, “Religion and Politics During the AKP Era: The Rise of Political Islam”, and “Religion and Politics in Turkish Media: Ideological Structures and Representation”. Subsequently, to concretely illustrate the contemporary reflections of this transformation, the study examines the 2023 presidential and parliamentary general elections. In the lead-up to the 2023 Turkish presidential and parliamentary elections, two main alliances played a significant role in the country’s politics: The People’s Alliance (Cumhur İttifakı) and the Nation Alliance (Millet İttifakı). The People’s Alliance is a coalition formed by the AKP and the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP). Before the 2023 elections, the alliance expanded to include other right-wing and conservative parties, such as the Great Union Party (Büyük Birlik Partisi, BBP) and the New World Party (Yeni Dünya Partisi, YDP). This alliance supports the presidential government system and backs the candidacy of the incumbent president and AKP chairperson, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. On the other hand, the Nation Alliance, established after the 2018 elections by the Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the Good Party (İYİ Parti, İYİP), represents an opposition bloc. Ahead of the 2023 elections, the alliance expanded to include parties with varying ideological backgrounds, such as the Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi, SP), the Future Party (Gelecek Partisi, GP), the Democrat Party (DP), and the Democracy and Progress Party (Demokrasi ve Atılım Partisi, DEVA), and is also referred to as the “Table of Six” (6’lı Masa in Turkish). The Nation Alliance opposes the presidential government system, advocating for a return to a parliamentary system, and supported the candidacy of the main opposition leader and CHP chairperson, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, for the presidency. In the run-up to the 14 May 2023 elections, during the holy month of Ramadan, when Muslims fast and worship, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu attended a traditional iftar program. Following the event, organized by the Istanbul Platform, a photograph of Kılıçdaroğlu with Istanbul CHP Chair Canan Kaftancıoğlu and parliamentary candidates was shared on social media. In the photo, Kılıçdaroğlu appeared to be stepping on a prayer rug (seccade) in his shoes, which sparked controversy. This highly debated incident, which significantly occupied the national agenda, is significant for concretely illustrating the relationship between religion and politics in Türkiye. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu’s participation in the iftar program demonstrates how politics interacts with the cultural context in Türkiye, where Islam holds a crucial place in the social and cultural sphere. The media debates that followed the release of the photograph further highlighted the importance of analyzing the relationship between politics and religious symbols, indicating the significance of its political implications. In this context, examining the news coverage of this incident through the critical discourse analysis (CDA) method provides a valuable way of gaining a deeper understanding of the relationship between religion and politics and deciphering the social meanings of political representations. Media outlets with different ownership structures and ideological orientations were selected as samples. These included Cumhuriyet—one of the oldest newspapers in the country, aligned with Atatürk’s principles and secularism; Yeni Şafak—a publication with a political Islamic stance; and Sabah—a newspaper known for its close ties to President Erdoğan. The news articles published on their websites regarding the incident

between 31 March and 6 April were analyzed. The research reveals that religion has become an integral part of political strategies and propaganda tools in Türkiye. Religious values and symbols serve as critical instruments, shaping social perception through political discourses. The study also demonstrates the efforts of political actors to dominate the media and how the media, as a hegemonic apparatus, reproduces religious discourses in line with ideological tendencies, transforming religion into a political tool through mediatization.

1.1. Religion and Politics During the Single-Party Era: The Foundations of Secular Policies

With the establishment of the Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, on the basis of secularism, took religion, as a personal form of belief, out of daily politics. In addition, the elements of religion affecting politics, which he had seen as a problem in the past, were deactivated. Türkiye's period of nation-state formation required a secular political structure that prioritized modernity. Kemalism's most revolutionary actions in the field of religion were the abolition of the sultanate, caliphate, and sharia law (Berkes 2016a). The abolition of the caliphate in March 1924 was the most important symbolic evidence of the new nationalist and secularist policies. It is no coincidence that the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye (Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, TBMM) passed the Tawhid-i Tedrisat (Unification of Education) Law, which put all educational institutions under the control of the state by ceasing the activities of the Islamic educational institutions of schools and madrasas, on the same day as the abolition of the caliphate. In April 1924, the Sharia courts were abolished; in 1925, the Hat Law was enacted, banning the wearing of headgear such as the fez and veil, items which were considered uncivilized; Swiss Civil Law was adopted in 1926 and the Latin alphabet was adopted in 1928; and, in the same year, the statement that Islam was the official religion of the state was removed from the Constitution, ending all institutionalization of Islam. All these nationalist and secular reforms gradually distanced the Republic of Türkiye from the political influence of Islam (Ete 2003).

Until 1945, the CHP government, which continued its de facto one-party rule, took serious and determined steps towards the secularization of the country, making no concessions to political Islam (Eroğul 2013). It can be said that not needing the popular vote to come to power facilitates the implementation of such a politics of religion. However, with the transition to multi-party life, the CHP—which needed popular votes to come to power—departed from this understanding of secularism and began to pursue a more compromise-based religious policy. This approach has brought political Islamist ideas to the surface and enhanced currents that had been suppressed in social life but were still active (Tunaya 1998). Political parties were also affected by this revival. As a matter of fact, most of the 24 political parties established between July 1945 and May 1950 included religion, tradition, and secularism in their programs; some of these parties even became representatives of political Islam (Kırkpınar 2018).

1.2. Religion and Politics in the Multi-Party Era: The Transformation of Religious Policies

With the victory of the DP in the 1950 elections, Türkiye began to rapidly move away from the strict secularist practices of the single-party era (B. Sayarı 1978). In this speech, Adnan Menderes, who announced the program of the new government in the parliament, divided Atatürk's reforms into those that were accepted by the people and those that were not and implied that the new DP government would only protect those reforms that were accepted by the nation. According to B. Sayarı (1978), what Menderes meant by 'reforms that were not accepted by the public' was secularism. As a continuation of this discourse, Menderes mentioned the power of the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye in a speech in 1955 and said, "Right now, if you want, you can even bring back the caliphate" (Işıklı 1997; Okutan and Tekin 2015). In the first month of the DP government, the ban on the

Arabic call to prayer was lifted with the support of some CHP deputies. The fact that CHP deputies themselves admitted that the reason for their support was their desire not to lose the 1954 elections is one of the most important signs of the political influence of religion (B. Sayarı 1978).

In the competitive environment created by the transition to multi-party political life, electoral strategies aimed at meeting the suppressed religious expectations of the people became more important. In this context, the DP, which gained the support of the “periphery” by legitimizing Islam and traditional values and enabled the transfer of power from the bureaucratic–political elite to the commercial (economic) elite, implemented important changes in the context of religious policies (Ahmad 2010; Karpat 2013; Koçak 2011). As a matter of fact, new regulations concerning religious life, such as the lifting of the ban by a parliamentary decision on 16 June 1950, the resumption of the call to prayer in Arabic, the re-inclusion of religion classes in the curricula of primary and secondary schools, the introduction of religious broadcasts on the radio, the resumption of Imam Hatip schools and an increase in their number, the acceleration of the construction of mosques, and the expansion of Quran courses, were implemented during the DP period (Şahin 2012).

In Türkiye, the official state ideology’s removal of religion from the center of political debates led religious groups to look at political Islam as an outlet. This tendency, which partially manifested itself in the Justice Party (AP), became more visible with the National Order Party (Milli Nizam Partisi, MNP) in the 1970s. Over time, the MNP evolved into the National Salvation Party (MS), the Welfare Party (RP), and the Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi, FP) and became the basis for the AKP’s politics. The MNP was the first Turkish political party with Islamic references. The MNP was founded on 28 January 1970 under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan. The İskender Pasha community of the Naqshbandi order strongly encouraged the establishment of an Islamist party. It is known that Erbakan and some of the other founders of the MNP belonged to this community. However, prominent members of other Islamic communities also joined the party. As a result of the political conjuncture created, the MNP was dissolved by the Constitutional Court in 1971 due to its anti-secularist activities (Özbudun and Hale 2010; T. Yılmaz 2015; Kalaycıoğlu 2007). Following the dissolution of the MNP, the National Salvation Party (Milli Selamet Partisi, MSP), another representative of the National Vision Movement, was founded on 11 October 1972. Although the MSP had a “National Vision” and a nationalistic approach, it brought the ideal of the Islamic world to Türkiye’s agenda through the “Islamic Common Market” discourse. Before 1980, this party, which drew attention with its anti-secularist actions, was also shut down by the 12 September coup d’état and its executives, particularly Necmettin Erbakan, were banned from politics (Kalaycıoğlu 2006; Erdoğan 2012; S. Yılmaz 2011b).

Following the 12 September 1980 military coup, Türkiye remained under military rule for an extended period (1980–1983). On 19 July 1983, the military administration allowed the re-establishment of political parties. After this date, with the support of Necmettin Erbakan, the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi, RP) was founded and quickly gained influence along an Islamist ideological line. With the 1987 referendum, the political bans imposed during the coup era were lifted, enabling Necmettin Erbakan to re-enter active politics, where he rapidly garnered significant mass support. The RP, which was constantly growing stronger, succeeded in forming a coalition government with the True Path Party (Doğru Yol Partisi, DYP) in 1996. The “Welfare–Path” government formed by Erbakan and Tansu Çiller lasted only eleven months and Erbakan was forced to resign in 1997 under intense pressure from the military and civil society organizations claiming to be pro-secularist. Among the developments that paved the way for 28 February were the iftar dinner given by Erbakan to sect leaders at the prime minister’s residence, the “Jerusalem Night” organized by the Sincan Municipality, and Erbakan’s efforts to improve relations with Muslim countries.

The event that led to the fall of the Erbakan government was the National Security Council (Milli Güvenlik Kurulu, MGK) meeting of 28 February 1997. In general, the MGK meeting and the decisions taken were referred to as the “February 28th process”. The fall of the Refah-Yol government was followed by the closure of the party by the Constitutional Court in 1998 due to RP’s anti-secular activities (Özbudun and Hale 2010; Acar 2010; İçer 2011). With the decisions taken by the MGK on 28 February 1997, Islamic civil society and capital were put under pressure. In addition, headscarved women were prevented from working in the public sector or accessing education and training, the middle sections of Imam Hatip schools were closed, and the coefficient application that would prevent young people graduating from Imam Hatip and other vocational high schools from entering universities was put into effect. In addition, through the February 28th process, the visibility of Islam in the public sphere was suppressed. Through this process, the Islamic press and publications began to be brought under control, and the groundwork was laid for the rise of national and secular media (Tunahan 2015).

When the RP was in power, it tried to realize the project of Islamizing society with state support. As a result of these developments, the RP was shut down and political bans imposed on its executive cadres. The FP participated in the 1999 elections as the successor of the RP (Arpacı 2020). In the local and general elections held on 18 April 1999, the FP received 18.4% of the local votes, 15.4% in general, and 23.7% in metropolitan municipalities. In particular, the victory in the metropolitan cities of Istanbul and Ankara marked a turning point for political Islam in Türkiye. With these results, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who won the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, emerged as a leader who would shape both Turkish politics and the future of political Islam. He was convicted of “inciting people to hatred and enmity on the grounds of class, race, religion, sect, or regional difference” for a poem he read at a rally in Siirt, and was imprisoned for 4 months and 10 days after being stripped of his title as mayor of Istanbul in 1999 (Karakaya 2010; V. Yılmaz 2011c). In the meantime, the FP was shut down. When the revolutionary fringe of the party failed to gain a majority in the party, it founded the AKP on 14 August 2001 under the leadership of Erdoğan. The National Vision tradition was thus divided into the AKP and the SP. Erdoğan and his team, who said that they “took off the shirt of the National Vision”, approached their first elections with a discourse that emphasized the ideal of democracy in Western standards and the European Union, with less of a focus on political Islam. In the 3 November 2002 general elections, the AKP received 34.28% of the votes and gained power to form a government on its own; it has won all general elections since (SupremeElectionCouncil 2002; S. Sayarı 2020; Türk 2004; Çarkoğlu and Kalaycıoğlu 2009).

1.3. Religion and Politics During the AKP Era: The Rise of Political Islam

Since coming to power in 2002, the AKP has played a significant role in reshaping Türkiye’s political and social structure. The party’s political identity is largely based on Türkiye’s conservative and Islamic values. The AKP’s relationship with religion involves both advocating for traditional Islamic values and redefining the role of religion in the public sphere in a way that aligns with Türkiye’s modernization process. The party’s political success stems from its effective use of religious values to gain public support and establish sustainable governance (R. Yılmaz 2011a). In the first years of its rule, the AKP, which had kept its political Islamism at a lower level due to the law, the existing bureaucratic order, and state habits, gradually positioned its own cadres in all institutions of the state and made the ideals of the conservative sector more visible and effective in the public sphere. Especially with the end of the term of the 10th president, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, Erdoğan, who increased his influence in the country’s administration, shaped the

power and ideological apparatuses of the state step by step, in line with his ideology, and enabled the representation of political Islam in the public sphere.

At the core of the AKP's religious policies lies an effort to balance the religious tradition extending from the Ottoman era to the Republic and the state's understanding of secularism during the modernization process. Upon coming to power, the party aimed to increase the visibility of religion in politics and transform it into a social force (Aslan 2015). The AKP's rise to power in all the elections it has contested has led to an increase in the number of bureaucrats aligned with it and has also pushed the national-secular bureaucrats of the past out of the system. With the appointments made, the structure of institutions was changed and all state institutions, especially the judiciary, police, army, universities, and national education, were aligned with the AKP's policies. After this time-consuming process of change, Erdoğan gained the power to freely implement any decision he wished, which led to the gradual transformation of the country's official ideology by political Islam. In the meantime, the Anatolian capital, the so-called 'green capital', has become stronger and stronger and has begun to compete with the traditional capital of Istanbul, implementing policies that prioritize its own values. Finally, in terms of the media, the influence of the exclusionary secularist approach was broken, media organs close to the AKP were brought to the fore, and the media's function of legitimizing the government's religious policies in public opinion while voicing the religious demands of the periphery was magnified (Akyüz 2017).

In this context, the headscarf ban was lifted in all public institutions and organizations, including universities and middle and high schools; the middle sections of Imam Hatip High Schools were reopened; faculties of theology were established in almost all universities and their quotas were kept at the highest levels; there was a large increase in the quota allocated to the Presidency of Religious Affairs; the opening of Quran courses was made easier, with a course opened in almost every neighborhood; and basic religion courses started to be taught in schools, along with elective Quran courses. In addition, the rights of students and public employees who were victimized during the February 28th process were restored; students who were expelled from universities were given the right to return to school and public employees who were dismissed from their jobs were given the right to return to civil service. During the AKP period, there has been a significant increase in the public visibility of religion and religious people. In this respect, the relationship of the state (regime) with religion and religious people was reshaped on a positive basis and the tension between the two was eliminated (Akyüz 2017). Meanwhile, a new Islamic elite has formed in Türkiye, including 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).

1.4. Religion and Politics in Turkish Media: Ideological Structures and Representations

The Turkish media has often functioned as an ideological apparatus of the state, reflecting the dominant ideology, and has shaped discourse on the relationship between religion and politics within this framework. The Turkish press, which adopted a discourse in line with the ideology of the CHP during the single-party period, diversified its representations according to different perspectives on the relationship between religion and politics as the political environment pluralized. The Republic's modernization project's distance from religion was also reflected in representations in the press, and religious issues were filtered through a secular perspective, as reflected in discourses in all periods when the dominant ideology maintained its power, especially in the single-party period (Kılıç 2012; A. Yılmaz 2016).

From a comparative perspective, it is possible to see some similarities between the media system in Türkiye and Southern European countries in terms of the development of the press. For example, as in Italy and Spain, where journalists were also politicians, Türkiye has had journalists and even newspaper-owning MPs in parliament. Forty journalists, media owners, or columnists served as members of parliament in different periods until Atatürk's death. On the other hand, a point of difference is that, until 1957, the highest number of members of parliament in Türkiye were of military origin. The centrality of the state and the military are important parameters that reveal the specificity of the media system in Türkiye. Until 1945, during the single-party period, the press had already assumed the task of upholding the Kemalist regime and contributed to the establishment and consolidation of the modern Republic by promoting Western values and lifestyles. In the newspapers that became popular from the 1950s onwards, an emphasis on being 'independent' began to replace being seen as supporters or opponents of the CHP or the DP, as mattered in the past (Bek 2010).

The press played a very important role in the DP coming to power and supported the DP by presenting it to the public as a savior. However, the initially positive and liberating environment was eventually replaced by debates on repression, censorship, and a biased press. During the DP government of 1950–1960, some media outlets viewed the expanding influence of religion in the political sphere positively, supporting the DP, and the delivery of the news was skewed in this direction. Likewise, the opposition press represented the steps taken as an attack on the civilization project of the Republic. Following the 1960 coup d'état, the military regime that came to power granted some freedoms to the press but press organizations with a positive approach to religious issues were hesitant to express their opinions for a long time (Çakır and Yavalar 2017; Kaya 2010; Koloğlu 1992). The 1960 Coup, the 1971 Memorandum, and the subsequent 12 September 1980 Coup significantly shaped newspapers' perspectives on religious issues, generally aligning them with dominant values. Military scions, which often justified the coups by citing "secularism" and the "state being under threat", adopted an uncompromising stance towards the representation of religion in the media. After 12 September, the Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi, ANAP) came to power, and its positive attitude towards conservatism and its definition of conservatism as one of the four tendencies constituting the party enabled pluralization in its representation in the press. The ANAP period was also a time when alternatives to the official ideology were given more space in newspapers and neoliberal winds shaped the media. During this period, press organizations were taken over by powerful conglomerates and newspaper owners, whose priority was commercial gain; they shaped their pages according to this ideology (Tuncay and Zürcher 2012; Koloğlu 1992; Arsan 2013).

The concentration of media ownership in Türkiye under AKP rule has led to a significant reduction in media diversity and increased government influence over editorial content (Kaya and Çakmur 2010). The AKP government restructured Türkiye's media landscape through privatization and alliances with pro-government business groups, undermining journalistic independence (Yesil 2016). To ensure the direct support of the media, ownership structures and capital shares in the media were changed. These changes started to be implemented in 2007. As media ownership was reorganized, the central media was constructed as a political tool that did not go beyond the discourse of the government. Large media groups were directed to align with the government against the threat of being economically weakened and discredited, because media organizations built on capital had a lot to lose (Saran 2014).

Since 2002, when the AKP came to power, the ownership structure of the media in Türkiye has changed to reflect the current arrangement of political power. Marx and Engels' observation that the class that controls the material means of production also controls the

mental means of production can be seen in the table below (Engels and Marx 1992). By controlling the means of intellectual production, the AKP, which controls the executive branch of political power, seeks to subordinate the thoughts of those who lack these means. To this end, the AKP government has reorganized the media industry, attempted to concentrate media outlets in the hands of those close to it, and sought to put pressure on and transform those it could not control. The government liquidated the Çukurova Group, bought its media organizations, and transformed the Doğu Group. It is no coincidence that, shortly after coming to power, the AKP targeted the Uzan Group, its rival in the elections. It is noteworthy that the Savings Deposit Insurance Fund (Tasarruf Mevduatı Sigorta Fonu, TMSF), an institution under the Prime Minister's Office, was used effectively while the media industry was being reorganized. The companies seized by the SDIF were sold to people close to political power, sometimes even to people with direct ties to the government, and state facilities such as public bank loans were used in the sale process. On the other hand, it was observed that the media group that was not asked to buy the media outlet was forced to withdraw tenders on such grounds as "lack of competition" (Saran 2014). Legislation passed by the AKP government facilitated the consolidation of media ownership by pro-government entities, further eroding the diversity of viewpoints in the Turkish media (Christensen 2007). As of today, the Erdoğan government has succeeded in establishing domination over a very large part of the Turkish media.

2. Materials and Methods

Following the historical examination of the relationship between religion and politics in Türkiye, a case study was conducted to frame the current situation. During the campaign period preceding the 2023 presidential and parliamentary general elections, the media coverage of an incident involving Kılıçdaroğlu stepping on a prayer rug (used by Muslims for worship) in his shoes was analyzed using the CDA method. Critical discourse analysis is a methodological approach developed by pioneering academics such as Teun A. van Dijk, Ruth Wodak, Norman Fairclough, Theo van Leeuwen, and Gunther Kress, who focused on discourse as research material. CDA aims to reveal what is meant by and hidden in the discourse itself (Çoban 2024). It is assumed by critical discourse analysts that, beneath all discourses, there is a hidden fundamental thought or ideology (Eagleton 1991). CDA is a functional, non-positivist, interpretative mode of analysis that has been frequently used in media studies since the 1970s, offering researchers a wide range of possibilities in analyzing both texts and the ideology reflected in them. The most important difference from qualitative content analysis is that it deals with the text as a whole without dividing it into parts and reveals how the dominant discourse in the text is constructed (İrvan 2000). Every news item in the media is a process of reconstruction. In order to analyze the discourse reconstructed in the news, it is first necessary to consider the news as a discourse. This depends on analyzing the text created through language and discourse by addressing its production process and social and ideological context (İnal 1996). The journalists who create the discourse of the news are not only the spokespersons of the elite but are also part of the social power structure. The central question is how journalists reproduce or resist the ideologies they confront. Connections with sources, the style of the news, how it is presented, the quotations used, the dominant headlines, and associations produced in the text are the elements of discourse that constitute meaning and ideology in the news (van Dijk 2003).

To analyze the social and ideological meanings produced by the relationship between religion and politics in media discourse, we selected the case of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, Chairperson of the CHP, Leader of the Main Opposition, and Presidential Candidate, stepping/standing on a prayer rug (used by Muslims for worship) in his shoes as a focal

incident. The selection criteria for this case included the intersection of religion and politics, the prominence of religious symbolism, the event's occurrence within an election campaign context, the extensive media coverage, and the diversity of discourse elements it generated. As a sample, newspapers representing different social and political segments in Türkiye were chosen: Cumhuriyet, Sabah, and Yeni Şafak. The selection criteria for these publications included national-level circulation, significant coverage of the incident, accessibility, and ideological diversity. Cumhuriyet, one of Türkiye's oldest newspapers, is owned by the Cumhuriyet Foundation, chaired by Alev Coşkun, a long-time member of the CHP. Cumhuriyet's editorial principles are stated as follows: "On the path of 'enlightenment' paved by Atatürk's revolutions and principles, it will strive for the independence of reason from bigotry, science from religion, and the adoption of the principle of secularism by society". Cumhuriyet is close to the current opposition, especially the main opposition party, CHP, and opposes government policies. Sabah, which adopted a more liberal discourse in the past, changed its ownership structure during the AKP rule. Sabah was seized by the SDIF due to its debts and bought by Çalık Holding, which is close to the AKP, through a tender; it has since adopted a discourse supporting AKP policies. Sabah is currently owned by the Turkuvaz Media Group. Serhat Albayrak, brother of Berat Albayrak, Erdoğan's son-in-law and the first Minister of Treasury and Finance of the presidential government system, is the Group's deputy chairman of the board of directors. Founded in 1995, Yeni Şafak operates under the Albayrak Media Group. This group is known to have close ties with the AKP and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Nuri Albayrak, a shareholder of Albayrak Yayın Holding A.Ş., is a friend of President Erdoğan from Istanbul Imam Hatip High School. The newspaper publishes on a conservative line and shapes its news with a discourse that criticizes the opposition, particularly the CHP.

The news articles published on the websites of Cumhuriyet, Sabah, and Yeni Şafak, selected as the sample, were collected for seven days following the incident on 31 March 2023. The data obtained were analyzed within the framework of Teun A. van Dijk's CDA approach. Having developed a systematic approach to analyzing news discourse, van Dijk argues that news can be analyzed in terms of macro- and microstructures (van Dijk 1983). Macrostructure analysis is carried out in two ways: thematic and schematic. Under the macrostructure heading, headlines, news entries, and photographs constitute the focus of thematic analysis. The presentation of the event, its outcomes, background, and contextual information, news sources, and the comments of the parties constitute the elements of schematic analysis. The purpose of a macrostructural analysis is to understand what the discourse is about and what the author of the news story is producing the news story for. It helps explain what information remains in the reader's mind after reading the news item. Headlines and news entries are the most important elements in determining the semantic framework of the news (van Dijk 2009). Macro propositions include methods of information reduction, generalization, and construction. To put it another way, the place and time of the event may not be given in the headlines or news entries. By making generalizations, some features of the event are covered up and the whole event can be described with a single concept, or different actions can be fictionalized by expressing a single action. Microstructural includes syntactic analysis, word choice, and news rhetoric. The aim of a microstructural analysis is the analysis of segmental meanings. This includes the meaning of words, as well as implicit or indirect forms of meaning. Thus, it is shown that the choice made in line with the ideology of the newsmaker has a function and that there is information that affects the stance of the receiver. Macro- and microstructures are the meanings that are most memorable and reproducible for the receiver (van Dijk 2009). The microstructures of discourse are the building blocks of meaning construction. They include word choices, syntactic structures, and the organization of sentences and

paragraphs, all of which collectively work to construct an ideological message (van Dijk 2009). In conducting such analyses, van Dijk considers social contexts and ideological factors, aiming to uncover the social meanings embedded in individuals' linguistic choices. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of how language operates at both individual and societal levels (van Dijk 2001). Similarly, Fairclough emphasizes that micro-level analysis is conducted using ideological emphases, emotional connotations, subject–predicate relationships, active/passive structures, and textual coherence. According to him, discourse analysis at the micro level not only examines linguistic features but also reveals how power relations and ideologies are embedded in language (Fairclough 1992). Van Dijk's work on the micro-level analysis of discourse helps us understand how ideologies and power dynamics are not just reflected but also constructed through language. It focuses on the minutiae of language use, including word choice, sentence structure, and the subtle conveyance of power relations (Graddol and Swann 1989).

3. Results

Before the presidential and parliamentary general elections held on 14 May 2023, news about opposition presidential candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu stepping on a prayer rug in his shoes received extensive coverage, particularly in Cumhuriyet, Sabah, and Yeni Şafak. An analysis of the content published between 31 March and 6 April 2023 examined a total of 18 articles (Table 1). Of these, seven were published in Cumhuriyet (Cumhuriyet Newspaper 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d, 2023e, 2023f, 2023g), six were ran in Sabah (Sabah Newspaper 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d, 2023e, 2023f), and five featured in Yeni Şafak (Yeni Şafak Newspaper 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d, 2023e).

Table 1. News articles included in the study.

Date	Newspaper	Headline
31 March 2023	Sabah	"Kılıçdaroğlu stepped on a prayer rug in his shoes! Strong reaction on social media"
1 April 2023a	Cumhuriyet	"Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's 'prayer rug' statement: 'I am very sorry...'"
1 April 2023b	Cumhuriyet	"Theologian Cemil Kilic: If it is not removed after the prayer, it is not a prayer rug!"
1 April 2023c	Cumhuriyet	"'Prayer rug' debate. . . Former minister İsmail Müftüoğlu, the host of the iftar, made a statement: 'Criticisms of Kılıçdaroğlu are far from common sense'"
1 April 2023a	Sabah	"They were 'silent' on the desecration of prayer rugs: Why are Kılıçdaroğlu's partners silent about the outrageous pose?"
1 April 2023b	Sabah	"Reaction against Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu: CHP mentality itself. . ."
1 April 2023	Yeni Şafak	"Kılıçdaroğlu posed with his shoes on a prayer rug"
2 April 2023	Cumhuriyet	"Erdoğan, who entered the 'prayer rug' debate before iftar, after iftar: 'We do not pursue false agendas'"
2 April 2023	Sabah	"It's not the first time Kılıçdaroğlu stepped on a prayer rug! Here is the new image"
2 April 2023	Yeni Şafak	"President Erdoğan reacts to Kılıçdaroğlu and the prayer rug: They get their instructions from Pennsylvania"
3 April 2023	Cumhuriyet	"Ertan Aksoy says: The conscience of society did not accept the prayer rug slander"
3 April 2023	Sabah	"Citizens' reaction to Kılıçdaroğlu on 'Prayer Rug': Attack on our religious and spiritual values"

Table 1. Cont.

Date	Newspaper	Headline
3 April 2023a	Yeni Şafak	“Someone has seen the prayer rug!”
3 April 2023b	Yeni Şafak	“New chapter in the scandal: Another photo of Kılıçdaroğlu stepping on a prayer rug in his shoes has emerged”
4 April 2023	Cumhuriyet	“The official at the venue where the ‘prayer rug’ photograph was taken speaks for the first time”
5 April 2023	Sabah	“Temel Karamollaoğlu’s strange ‘prayer rug’ example: He tries to justify Kılıçdaroğlu’s disrespect”
5 April 2023	Cumhuriyet	“The pro-government media had targeted him. . . The story of the ‘prayer rug’ photo revealed”
6 April 2023	Yeni Şafak	“MHP leader Bahçeli reacts to Kılıçdaroğlu: He stepped on the prayer rug in his shoes”

The analyzed articles were examined in detail under two main categories. Under the macrostructure category, the overall structures of the articles were analyzed. Thematic analysis was applied to headlines and introductions, while schematic analysis was used to evaluate the presentation of the news, background and contextual information, sources, and comments from involved parties. Under the microstructure category, the linguistic structures of the articles were thoroughly examined. This included a focus on syntactic analysis, word choices, and news rhetoric.

3.1. Macrostructure: Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is crucial for deciphering the meaning of a text within its social and political context, as it identifies the themes around which the discourse is constructed and determines which social groups’ interests it supports (van Dijk 2008).

Sabah, in its first news article on the incident, used provocative discourse, with the headline “Kılıçdaroğlu stepped on a prayer rug in his shoes! Strong reaction on social media”. Cumhuriyet, on the other hand, featured Kılıçdaroğlu, who gave an apology stating that he was very sorry, as its first news article and adopted the narrative that the incident happened involuntarily. In contrast, Yeni Şafak reported the news with the headline “Kılıçdaroğlu posed with his shoes on a prayer rug”, implying that there was conscious intent behind the incident.

Sabah published the following headlines in subsequent days: “They were ‘silent’ on prayer rug desecration: Why are Kılıçdaroğlu’s partners silent on the outrageous pose?”; “Reaction against Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu: CHP mentality itself. . .”; “It’s not the first time Kılıçdaroğlu stepped on a prayer rug! Here is the new image”; “Citizens’ reaction to Kılıçdaroğlu on ‘Prayer Rug’: Attack on our religious and spiritual values”; “Temel Karamollaoğlu’s strange ‘prayer rug’ example: He tries to justify Kılıçdaroğlu’s disrespect”. The newspaper emphasized religious sensitivities, portraying Kılıçdaroğlu as a figure harming society’s religious and moral values. By omitting Kılıçdaroğlu’s public apology, this framing of the news centered on criticism of the opposition. Using exaggerated expressions such as “a flood of reactions” to reinforce its narrative, the newspaper employed divisive language attributing an individual act to an entire group with phrases such as “they remained silent”. Furthermore, the generalization included other opposition leaders unrelated to the incident, thereby constructing a negative discourse against the opposition in the lead-up to the elections.

Yeni Şafak, on the other hand, published the following news reports on the subject: “President Erdoğan reacts to Kılıçdaroğlu and the prayer rug: They get their instructions from Pennsylvania”, “Someone has seen the prayer rug!”, “New chapter in the scandal:

Another photo of Kılıçdaroğlu stepping on a prayer rug in his shoes has emerged”, and “MHP leader Bahçeli reacts to Kılıçdaroğlu: He stepped on the prayer rug in his shoes”. Yeni Şafak adopted a narrative suggesting that the act in question was carried out deliberately and portrayed Kılıçdaroğlu as a figure violating religious values. By using expressions such as “They get their instructions from Pennsylvania”, the newspaper reinforced the ruling party’s discourse and built a narrative linking the opposition to foreign powers, thereby undermining its credibility. With words such as “scandal”, it fostered a divisive approach in subsequently published news articles.

Cumhuriyet published consecutive news articles on the same day with the headlines “Theologian Cemil Kilic: If it is not removed after the prayer, it is not a prayer rug!” and “Former minister İsmail Müftüoğlu, the host of the iftar, made a statement: ‘Criticisms of Kılıçdaroğlu are far from common sense’”. By featuring the statements of religious leaders, the newspaper instilled confidence in public opinion and developed its discourse that there was no disrespect shown towards religious values. In the following days, headlines were published such as “Erdoğan, who entered the ‘prayer rug’ polemic before iftar, after iftar: We do not pursue false agendas”, “Ertan Aksoy says: The conscience of society did not accept the prayer rug slander”, “The official at the venue where the ‘prayer rug’ photograph was taken speaks for the first time”, and “The pro-government media had targeted him. . . The story of the ‘prayer rug’ photo revealed”. Cumhuriyet frequently featured Kılıçdaroğlu’s apology statement, labeling the incident as slander and portraying the opposition leader as a figure respectful of religious and moral values. By including the opinions of religious leaders and witnesses to the event, the newspaper reinforced its narrative and framed its coverage around the defense of Kılıçdaroğlu. Additionally, it criticized the government, using phrases such as “propaganda apparatus”, and became part of a divisive discourse with expressions such as “the pro-government media had targeted him”.

In all three newspapers, which represent different social groups, the news was constructed around an “us vs. them” narrative, with religion serving as the primary axis of division. Cumhuriyet referred to the AKP and its supporters as “AKP members” or “religious circles”, while Yeni Şafak and Sabah described the CHP and its supporters as “CHP sympathizers” showing “the CHP mentality”. Additionally, it was observed that some of the 5W1H questions, which are fundamental to journalistic practice, were left unanswered in the analyzed news articles. In particular, Yeni Şafak and Sabah were found to have distanced themselves from addressing the “how” of the incident. Therefore, it can be argued that the semantic framework of the news contains propositions, information reduction, generalizations, and reconstructions.

3.2. Macrostructure: Schematic Analysis

The schematic structure includes the presentation of the main event, conclusions, background, contextual information, news sources, and parties to the event. Background information points to the social and political aspects of events. When an event is reported, it necessarily undergoes change. News is always created according to a particular person’s or group’s perception. Meaning and background information are generally omitted in the news; the event being reported is detached from its context and presented to the reader by adding interpretation within certain patterns. Knowing the social, political, and historical aspects of the event makes the event comprehensible and helps to make sense of the ideology embedded in the news by establishing a cause-and-effect relationship (van Dijk 1988).

The religious/secular conflict in Türkiye involves a long-standing social structural code. The conservative governance approach of the AKP, which has been in power for the

last 25 years, has kept the conflict current. In this context, the context and background information of the news items analyzed in the research is as follows. During the 2023 Turkish presidential and parliamentary elections, the People's Alliance (Cumhur İttifakı) and the Nation Alliance (Millet İttifakı) played a decisive role in shaping the country's political landscape. The People's Alliance was established under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). Ahead of the elections, it expanded into a broader coalition with the participation of conservative and nationalist parties. The alliance advocated for the continuation of the presidential government system and aimed for the reelection of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. On the other hand, the Nation Alliance was formed by the Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Good Party (İYİ Party). Over time, it evolved into an opposition coalition, incorporating parties from both conservative and secular ideological backgrounds. The alliance supported a return to the parliamentary system and endorsed Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's candidacy for the presidency. During the election process, Kılıçdaroğlu's participation in an iftar program and the subsequent spread of a photo on social media allegedly showing him stepping on a prayer rug (seccade) triggered widespread public debate. The photo in question was first shared by Hamza Dağ, AKP Deputy Chairman, on his social media account with the following words: "The ground you step on with your shoe is the prayer rug used by Muslims when prostrating". Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu shared a post on the issue on his X account and said, "I am sorry, I am very sorry that I did not see the prayer rug. I would never want to hurt anyone in the world, especially my nation. From here, I leave those who abuse and the propaganda apparatus they use to the conscience of our nation". The CHP's press office also issued a written statement: "Due to the intensity of the photo shoot and the rush of those who wanted to have their photos taken, the prayer rug on the floor was not noticed. We would like to state that our President and Provincial Chairman, whose sensitivity towards such situations is known by everyone, are very sorry for this unfortunate situation".

When the schematic structure of the news items published by Sabah on the incident is analyzed, it is observed that background information is omitted and comments are added within certain patterns. Sabah headed every news item with the term "coalition of 7". This refers to the unification of 6 opposition parties to run a joint candidate, but the People's Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP), which is not one of these parties and represents Kurdish identity, is implied as the 7th party. "Coalition of 7" is therefore a discourse encouraged by the government. Similarly, the newspaper did not include the apologetic statements of Kılıçdaroğlu, the subject of the incident. Instead, they pointed to other opposition parties that had nothing to do with the incident, saying, "They were 'silent' about the desecration of prayer rugs: Why are Kılıçdaroğlu's partners silent over the outrageous pose?" In this way, the newspaper distanced itself from the context by pointing to other opposition parties that were not involved in the issue. Moreover, both sides of the incident were not covered in a balanced manner, and those who supported the government discourse were selected as news sources. One of them is former AKP Minister Bekir Bozdağ: "Some people say 'Mujahid' Kılıçdaroğlu. We witnessed a mujahid stepping on the prayer rug with his foot. It would be wrong not to condemn this. We are doing the right thing. Those who abuse religion are those who go to iftar without fasting". In addition, vague expressions such as "reaction from citizens" and statements by anonymous X users were used: "If you really had Islamic sensitivities, you would have realized that there was a prayer rug on the ground you stepped on. You couldn't realize it because, for the sake of votes, you break the fast for the fast you didn't keep and go on Friday for the prayer you didn't perform for 5 h. Shame on Religion Merchants like you and those who vote for you". Sabah revealed its ideology through comments such as "CHP mentality itself".

In the news articles published in *Yeni Şafak*, similar to *Sabah*, it was observed that background information was omitted and comments were added that fitted certain patterns. The newspaper referred to the statement made by Kılıçdaroğlu and the CHP on the issue, but did not include it in full and used the term “defense” instead of “statement”. The phrase “he stepped on the prayer rug in his shoes” was repeated often in the news report, every few sentences. Descriptions such as “coalition of 7” and “table of 7” were preferred in the news articles and loaded expressions such as “disgrace” were used. Both sides of the incident were not covered in a balanced manner and those who support the government discourse were selected as news sources. President Tayyip Erdoğan was one of them. Erdoğan’s speech also took the incident out of context: “Some may step on prayer rugs in their shoes because they receive instructions from Pennsylvania. My beloved nation will give the best answer to these on May 14th”. Another source cited by *Yeni Şafak* was Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the MHP, the coalition partner of the government. “Stepping on a prayer rug in one’s shoes is a violation of morality and ethics. That’s a shame. Kılıçdaroğlu called the headscarf a piece of cloth and made the prayer rug a piece of carpet. He doesn’t know our traditions and customs. He doesn’t know our nation”. *Yeni Şafak* framed the situation by using negative words such as “scandal” and “disgrace”, thereby revealing their ideology.

The news reports published by *Cumhuriyet* on the incident show that background information was obtained from a single source. The newspaper frequently covered statements made by Kılıçdaroğlu and the CHP on the issue and did not report any critical discourse. On the contrary, it prioritized the ‘expert’ opinions of religious leaders who did not characterize the situation as disrespectful. The headline “Theologian Cemil Kılıç: If it is not removed after the prayer, it is not a prayer rug!” suggested that the religious meaning of the prayer rug was up for discussion. The way the incident was reported in the news implied that it did not involve disrespect towards religion. By featuring the statement of former minister İsmail Müftüoğlu, the host of the iftar, that “criticisms of Kılıçdaroğlu are far from common sense”, *Cumhuriyet* did not give balanced coverage to all parties to the event, instead choosing to quote those who supported the opposition discourse as news sources. In the news, it was frequently repeated that Hamza Dağ was the first to share the photo, and the incident was characterized as an “operation”, thereby implicitly accusing AKP members and Erdoğan of pursuing false agendas. On the other hand, Ertan Aksoy was quoted by *Cumhuriyet* as saying in an interview with an opinion pollster: “The opposition’s task is to refer to the nearly 70 percent who stand against this slander. Staying connected to the concrete problems of society, rather than talking about how you unwittingly stepped on more prayer rugs. Because Mr. Kılıçdaroğlu has survived this slander thanks to his adherence to the advice given to him by his father”. It has been observed that statements such as “My son, you stay straight and the crooked will find trouble” were taken out of context and comments were made that fitted within certain patterns.

3.3. *Microstructure: Syntactic Analysis*

In van Dijk’s analytical model, syntactic analysis involves the examination of sentence structures in terms of length, simplicity, complexity, and active vs. passive constructions (van Dijk 1988). In active sentences, the subject who performs the action is known. In passive sentences, the subject performing the action is not clear. In news discourse, sentences with an active voice emphasize the righteousness of those who carry out the action, while those in the passive voice mostly function to legitimize the action.

It was observed that these three newspapers generally preferred short, simple, understandable sentences in their news articles on the subject. The use of active and passive sentences has been a determinant of the discourse of newspapers. *Sabah* printed active

statements such as “Kılıçdaroğlu stepped on a prayer rug in his shoes!”, “Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu received a strong reaction”, “The photo of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the presidential candidate of the coalition of 7, stepping on a prayer rug in his shoes drew great reaction”, and “Kılıçdaroğlu became the target of criticism with those shots” daily. In these sentence structures, the subject performing the action is clear. The sentences include negative expressions, and it is emphasized that the subject of this negative action is Kılıçdaroğlu. Similarly, the sentences “Temel Karamollaoğlu’s bizarre ‘prayer rug’ example: He tries to justify Kılıçdaroğlu’s disrespect” and “CHP supporters also attempted to cover up the scandal” are active and the opposition is the subject of the action. Like Sabah, Yeni Şafak also constructed active sentences such as “Kılıçdaroğlu posed with his shoes on a prayer rug” and “Another photo of Kılıçdaroğlu stepping on a prayer rug in his shoes has emerged”. Attention was again drawn to Kılıçdaroğlu as the subject who carried out the action. Cumhuriyet, on the other hand, actively conveyed both Kılıçdaroğlu’s statements and the commentary of news sources. Headlines such as “CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu made statements after the photo of him standing on a prayer rug became a hot topic on social media”, “The story of the ‘prayer rug’ photo revealed”, and “Ertan Aksoy says: The conscience of society did not accept the prayer rug slander” defended the righteousness of the subject through active sentences.

Although the three newspapers, representing different ideologies, advocated opposing views, they used sentences with active structures to reinforce their meaning and influence public opinion, through both indirect and direct narratives based on the sources.

3.4. Microstructure: Word Choices

The choice of words in the news is the main point of ideological structuring and is therefore very important. Word choices represent the widespread beliefs held by social actors in society and the worldview of the particular journalist and news organization involved (Özer 2015). The frequently used words in the analyzed news articles are visualized using word clouds. The word clouds created for the three newspapers are presented in Figures 1–3. The colors were assigned randomly to the words. Words with higher frequencies appear larger compared to others.



Figure 1. Sabah word cloud.

The most frequently used words in Sabah are “prayer rug”, “photo”, “shoe”, “reaction”, “CHP”, “Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu”, “disrespect”, and “stepped on”. These word choices reflect the discursive framework of the news and the ideological orientation of the newspaper. The narrative that the photo of CHP candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu stepping on a prayer rug in his shoes was an act of disrespect and triggered widespread public reaction is clearly evident in the word cloud. Additionally, regardless of the frequency, the newspaper made religious references through words such as “prayer”, “prostration”, “iftar”, “fasting”,

“Ramadan”, “Sayyid”, “Mujahid”, “Muslims”, “religioun”, “pious”, “taqiyya”, “our religious and spiritual values”, and “so-called clerics”, reflecting its conservative worldview. It also sensationalized the incident with exaggerated word choices such as “scandal”, “attack”, “insult”, “strong reaction”, “posed”, “shame on you”, “dirty negotiations”, “polemic is growing”, “the middle is stirred”, and “repercussions continue”. The same newspaper generalized responsibility for the incident to the entire opposition, which was not the subject, with word choices such as “coalition of 7”, “coalition partners silent”, “partisan”, “hypocritical politics”, and “CHP mentality”. With words such as “whitewash”, “race to look innocent”, “journalist close to CHP”, “troll”, “cover-up”, and “social media hitmen”, it directly accused opposition politicians of a crime.



Figure 2. Yeni Şafak word cloud.



Figure 3. Cumhuriyet word cloud.

The most frequently used words in Yeni Şafak were “prayer rug”, “Kılıçdaroğlu”, “shoe”, “CHP”, “stepped on”, “reaction”, “nation”, and “these”. These word choices reflect the discursive framework of the news and the ideological orientation of the newspaper. The words “Kılıçdaroğlu” and “CHP” directly place the incident within a political context, while “prayer rug”, “shoe”, and “stepped on” reinforce the impression that the incident harmed religious sensitivities. The words “reaction” and “nation” serve to amplify public responses and bring the incident into the political agenda, whereas the word “these” emphasizes social polarization. This choice of language demonstrates that the incident is framed not merely as an individual act but also as part of a broader social and political context. Additionally, regardless of the frequency, the newspaper made religious references through words such as “prayer”, “prostration”, “iftar”, “fasting”, “Ramadan”, “Muslims”, “pious”, and “religious people”, revealing its ideological stance. With word choices such as “scandal”, “disgrace”, “big lies”, “did not show sensitivity”, “his apology doesn’t match his misdemeanor”, “he posed”, “he attracted reaction”, “shame on him”, “these are not national”, “exonerate”,

“defense”, and “paranoia in CHP”, the newspaper represented the opposition candidate Kılıçdaroğlu and his party as breaking from religious and national values.

The most frequently used words in Cumhuriyet are “prayer rug”, “photo”, “explanation”, “nation”, “CHP”, “prayer”, “target”, and “Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu”. These word choices reflect the discursive framework of the news and the newspaper’s ideological orientation. Terms like “prayer rug” and “prayer” indicate that the incident was addressed through the lens of religious sensitivities, referencing social norms to construct a moral judgment. The word “photo” highlights the focus on the visual representation of the incident and how this image was placed at the center of the news coverage. The word “explanation” points to an effort to articulate a broader reality beyond the photo and to construct legitimacy around the event. The term “target” reflects how criticisms directed by a particular group were shaped within a narrative of victimization. Finally, the words “CHP” and “Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu” situate the incident within a political context, demonstrating the newspaper’s ideological stance and its framing of the event on a political level. Unlike Sabah and Yeni Şafak, Cumhuriyet used the phrase “stood on the prayer rug” instead of “stepped on the prayer rug” and so constructed a discourse that was in favor of the opposition. It also emphasized that there was no intent behind the incident with word choices such as “made a statement”, “crowd”, “carelessness”, “public conscience”, and “background of the photograph”. The same newspaper developed a discourse against the government by using the words “targeted”, “target board”, “slander”, “religious circles”, “ruling circles”, “abusers”, “prayer rug polemic”, “accusation”, “AKP members”, “ruling media”, and “operation”. Unlike the other two newspapers, which frequently emphasized words related to religion in their news articles, it changed the interpretation of the event by criticizing the policies of the government through the words “economic crisis”, “prayer rug politics”, and “relied on”.

When examining the word choices of the three different newspapers, it was observed that the same words, when used by the different newspapers, could produce different meanings depending on each newspaper’s ideological context and discursive framework.

3.5. Microstructure: News Rhetoric

Plato’s definition of rhetoric as “the power of deceiving judges in courts, members in assemblies, people at public meetings, and all citizens in councils through words” (Platon 1997) also applies to news rhetoric. News rhetoric involves the creation of desired effects through language and words, the alignment of the audience with a particular ideological perspective, and the persuasion of the public to adopt a desired stance. This process is shaped not only by the choice and form of language but also by the selection of evidence, visuals, news sources, and actors. Photographs, statements, and news sources shape the rhetoric of the news, while the way audiences interpret, accept, or reject these elements also plays a critical role. Therefore, the discursive structure of news serves as an important tool for guiding societal acceptance.

The news discourses of the three newspapers analyzed in this study clearly reflect their respective ideological stances, adopting an approach aimed at persuading the public. Yeni Şafak and Sabah, in their coverage of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, insinuated disrespect for religious values, thereby constructing a specific view of him. On the other hand, Cumhuriyet interpreted Kılıçdaroğlu’s actions as “carelessness” and presented the situation within a framework of criticism directed at those who manipulate religious values for political purposes, creating a completely opposite perception. These differing approaches shape the public’s understanding of the incident based on each newspaper’s ideological perspective. In this context, all three newspapers framed the incident through different ideological lenses, with their choice of language serving as a tool to reinforce their ideological stance.

Rather than merely reporting events, each newspaper sought to steer public opinion toward a specific position through their choice of language and style. This goes beyond the act of reporting and demonstrates how newspapers function as instruments of propaganda. Each newspaper not only acted as a narrator of the event but also provided an interpretation aligned with its ideological orientation, aiming to shape readers' perceptions and public opinion. This discursive structure contradicts the claim of neutrality in news reporting and leads to deviations from one of the fundamental principles of journalism—objectivity. Consequently, the language of news is not merely a means of conveying an event but also becomes a tool for ideological influence and guidance.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

With the proclamation of the Republic of Türkiye, a state structure was established based on the principle of secularism, and the relationship between religion and politics began to be regulated independently of theocratic elements. In line with Atatürk's understanding of secularism, reforms such as the abolition of the caliphate and Sharia, the closure of religious educational institutions, and the adoption of a modern legal system were implemented. Through these reforms, efforts were made to significantly limit the influence of religion on politics. However, with the transition to a multi-party system, the role of religion in politics began to re-emerge. During this period, religion became an important tool for political parties (Ete 2003; Berkes 2016a, 2016b). In particular, in the 1950s, the DP emphasized religious values in a societal context, gained public support, and came to power. The instrumentalization of religion in the political context, linked to social power relations, led to questioning of the principle of secularism and a reshaping of the role of religion in politics. From the 1960s onward, military coups and regimes of military tutelage deepened the tension between secularism and religion, increasing pressures on political Islam through interventions such as the 28 February 1997 process. Nevertheless, the RP and its successor, the FP, sought to revive the influence of political Islam in the public sphere, laying the foundations for the AKP. Coming to power in 2002, the AKP made religious elements more prominent in its political structures by integrating them with modernization efforts and the European Union harmonization process. Under the AKP's rule, religion in Turkish politics became not just a belief system, but also an important force shaping social structures and influencing political strategies. The party integrated religious values and Islamic identities into its political discourse, operating within the boundaries of the secular state while using religious elements as a source of political legitimacy. This approach earned the party broad public support but also created tensions due to secular transformation's association with Türkiye's modernization process (Ete 2010). The AKP, as a political power that reshaped the role of religion in Türkiye's social and political life, implemented significant structural changes in institutions, making religious values more visible in the public sphere. Similarly, the media became a crucial tool for shaping the government's political strategies and disseminating the ruling ideology. Through close relations with the media, the AKP promoted religious and conservative discourses while restricting the independence of media organizations, enabling the formation of a media structure aligned with the state's political power. During this period, the media underwent formal and content-based transformations to align with the government's policies and discourses (Kara 2015). The government's control over the media and the increasing concentration of media ownership narrowed ideological diversity and strengthened societal control by merging religious and political discourses (Kaya and Çakmur 2010).

This study examined the 2023 presidential elections in Türkiye to concretize contemporary reflections of the historical transformation of the relationship between religion and politics. News coverage from during the election process regarding opposition candidate

Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu “stepping/standing” on a prayer rug, used by Muslims for worship, in his shoes was analyzed using the CDA method. This case, which highlights how politics is shaped through religious symbolism and the context of the election period, was addressed by a sample of media outlets with varying ownership structures and ideological orientations. The thematic, schematic, syntactic, lexical, and rhetorical analyses of the news articles reveal how religion has been instrumentalized into a dynamic of political power and how the media reflects this process (van Dijk 1988, 2009). The language used in the news goes beyond merely reporting an event; it functions as an ideological tool that shapes public perception. Media discourses in Türkiye, particularly on topics concerning religion and politics, take on distinctly ideological forms. In this context, how religion and religious symbols are reflected in news language becomes a critical factor, shaping the country’s overall political and social structure.

The newspapers analyzed in the study offered significantly different perspectives on the role of religion in the media. In particular, *Yeni Şafak* and *Sabah* emphasized a perceived lack of respect for religious sensitivities. In their coverage, incidents such as Kılıçdaroğlu stepping on a prayer rug in his shoes were framed with terms such as “disrespect” and “scandal”, presenting violations of religious values as tools for societal criticism and political gains. This illustrates how religion’s position in society is used as a mechanism to reinforce the ideological hegemony of certain groups. The way religion and religious symbols are handled in media discourse also highlights the persistent tensions between conservative and secular groups. Pro-government media outlets advance the narrative that religious values must be protected and that those who disrespect them should face societal condemnation. In contrast, opposition-aligned media amplify the perception that the inclusion of religion in politics exacerbates social conflict and poses a threat to democracy. Media discourse not only reflects societal values but also functions as a mechanism through which political interests are shaped and reinforced via religion (van Dijk 2003). The debates around religious symbols in the newspapers both reinforce the role of religion in its social and cultural context and ideologically support political structures. The constant emphasis on religious sensitivities and the repeated processing of reactions to these issues exacerbate societal divisions.

The discursive manipulations carried out by the media through religious symbols aim to steer society in a specific ideological direction (Arsan 2013). The religious emphasis in the language of all three newspapers serves as a tool, not only to reinforce their own ideological views but also to criticize opposing political structures, demonstrating how the media’s role has evolved beyond mere news reporting into a mechanism for shaping societal thought within a particular framework. In this context, the relationship between religion and politics reveals a strong social structure shaped by media discourses. The rhetorical strategies employed by the media, combining narratives that defend religious values with those that target opposing political actors, significantly deepen societal polarization (Şener 2019; Furat 2019). Each newspaper’s ideological stance, the ways they incorporate religion into politics, and the language they use illustrate how effective religion-based strategies can be in shaping political agendas. Ultimately, the relationship between religion and politics embodies a growing contradiction fueled by media discourses and manipulations, serving to exacerbate societal divisions. The findings of this article are consistent with the results of previous research, i.e., the relationship between religion and politics can hinder a society’s pursuit of democracy (Casanova 1994; Esposito 2011; Juergensmeyer 2008).

The findings of the study indicate that religion has become a significant component of political strategies and propaganda tools in Türkiye, with religious values and symbols functioning as effective instruments for shaping societal perceptions. Additionally, the media plays a crucial role in this process by reproducing religious discourse in alignment

with ideological tendencies and mediatizing religion as a political tool. The strengths of this study lie in its in-depth analysis of the relationship between religion and politics within a contemporary framework and its strong theoretical foundation, supported by the relevant literature. However, its limitations include the lack of quantitative data and the limited diversity of the media sample. Future research could enhance the current findings by employing quantitative methods to examine the impact of the relationship between religion and politics on voter behavior. Additionally, qualitative studies, such as focus group interviews, could provide a more detailed exploration of how media content influences societal perceptions. Comparative studies, conducted in other Islamic countries, would also contribute to a broader understanding of the interplay between religion and politics in media across different cultural and political contexts.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

Abbreviations	Turkish Full Name	English Equivalent
AKP	Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi	Justice and Development Party
ANAP	Anavatan Partisi	Motherland Party
BBP	Büyük Birlik Partisi	Great Union Party
CDA	Eleştirel Söylem Analizi	critical discourse analysis
CHP	Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi	Republican People's Party
DEVA	Demokrasi ve Atılım Partisi	Democracy and Progress Party
DP	Demokrat Parti	Democratic Party
DYP	Doğru Yol Partisi	True Path Party
FP	Fazilet Partisi	Virtue Party
GP	Gelecek Partisi	Future Party
HDP	Halkların Demokratik Partisi	People's Democratic Party
İYİ Parti	İYİ Parti	Good Party
MGK	Milli Güvenlik Kurulu	National Security Council
MHP	Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi	Nationalist Movement Party
MNP	Milli Nizam Partisi	National Order Party
MSP	Milli Selamet Partisi	National Salvation Party
RP	Refah Partisi	Welfare Party
SP	Saadet Partisi	Felicity Party
TBMM	Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi	Grand National Assembly of Türkiye
TMSF	Tasarruf Mevduatı Sigorta Fonu	Savings Deposit Insurance Fund

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