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Conscience as a Heterodox Political Technology: Depolarization and the Reconfiguration of Religion–Politics in Turkey Through Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu’s Discourse

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Abstract

This article theorizes conscience as a political principle in the context of polarized democracy, examining its strategic articulation in the rhetoric of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu between 2010 and 2023. While existing scholarship on polarization and majoritarianism has focused primarily on identity politics and institutional erosion, less attention has been paid to the moral vocabularies through which opposition actors reconfigure democratic legitimacy. Drawing on conscience and theories of secularism, this study conceptualizes conscience as a mediating category that unsettles the binary between religious authority and secular reason. Through qualitative discourse analysis of parliamentary speeches, campaign addresses, and party documents, the article demonstrates how conscience is framed simultaneously as transcendent and universal—invoked as divinely resonant yet politically inclusive. I argue that this formulation constitutes a heterodox model of religion–politics relations that departs from both assertive secularism and majoritarianism. By privileging individual moral deliberation over collective identity claims, Kılıçdaroğlu articulates a liberal-pluralist alternative aimed at depolarizing democratic contestation. The findings contribute to political theory by advancing an account of conscience as a performative and strategic resource in democratic struggles. More broadly, the study offers a framework for understanding how moral rhetoric can be mobilized to foster democratic resilience in deeply divided societies, with implications extending beyond the Turkish case.

Keywords: conscience; religion and politics; RPP; Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu; Turkey

1. Introduction

Conscience is commonly understood as an inner moral faculty that guides individuals toward notions such as justice, righteousness, and fairness. While traditionally associated with divine authority, Enlightenment thought redefined conscience as a subjective domain grounded in individual judgment. Despite this apparent privatization, conscience has never been confined to the personal sphere. Historically, it has occupied a contested space at the intersection of religion and politics, where it has been both subjected to control by political authorities and mobilized as a resource against them (Mahoney 2021).

Existing scholarship has examined conscience primarily through two distinct lenses. Scholars influenced by Asad and Casanova in particular have emphasized how religious concepts are embedded within structures of power and public life. In parallel, the literature on conscience—represented by authors such as Strohm (2011) and Brennan (2006)—has focused on its ethical and legal dimensions, especially in relation to the protection of individual autonomy against coercive authority. While these perspectives offer important



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insights, they tend to treat conscience either as a site of moral resistance or as a principle requiring institutional protection. Less attention has been paid to how conscience operates as an active instrument within political discourse itself. In particular, the question of how conscience is strategically deployed by political actors to reconfigure legitimacy, challenge identity-based politics, and reshape the boundaries between religion and secularism remains underexplored.

This article addresses this gap by conceptualizing conscience not merely as a moral value but as a heterodox political technology. In this context, “political technology” refers to a set of repeatable discursive practices that organize political perception, structure moral evaluation, and guide political action. Conscience operates through two interrelated mechanisms: (1) legitimation and subject formation by redefining the source of political authority and constructing morally responsible individuals; and (2) discursive alignment, by enabling communication across ideological divides. Rather than functioning solely as a normative ideal, conscience becomes a mechanism through which political actors intervene in polarized environments and rearticulate the relationship between belief and politics.

The empirical focus of the article is the political discourse of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of the Republican People’s Party (RPP), the main opposition party in Turkey. Drawing on qualitative discourse analysis of speeches, public statements, and party texts from 2010 to 2023, the study traces how conscience is systematically mobilized within opposition politics. The findings demonstrate that conscience is not simply invoked as an ethical reference but is strategically deployed to counter identity-based polarization and to construct an alternative form of political legitimacy. In contrast to the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP), which has been widely associated with the instrumentalization of Sunni Islamic symbols and identity boundaries (Öniş 2007; Kertzer 1988; Özer and Özçetin 2024), Kılıçdaroğlu’s discourse foregrounds conscience as a universal, non-institutional moral and political register.

Although the political invocation of conscience is not entirely new within the RPP—having been incorporated into its program as early as 1931 alongside the principle of secularism—Kılıçdaroğlu introduces a distinctive formulation. It is worth noting from the outset that Republican assertive secularism (Kuru 2009, pp. 11–13) also framed religion as ‘a matter of conscience’—yet this framing simultaneously excluded religious expression from the public and political sphere. Kılıçdaroğlu’s conceptualization departs from this tradition: rather than privatizing religion under the banner of conscience, he mobilizes conscience as a non-institutional moral resource that remains open to public articulation. This distinction is central to the argument developed in what follows. As a pious Republican, he constructs conscience as an alternative mode of belief that operates without what Durkheim (1995) would describe as a “church,” thereby decoupling faith from institutional religious authority. In doing so, he repositions conscience as a mediating dispositive (Foucault 1980, pp. 194–96; Agamben 2009, pp. 1–24) that challenges both religious majoritarianism and rigid forms of secular exclusion.

By situating conscience within contemporary debates on democratic polarization, this article contributes to the literature in two ways. First, it shifts the analytical focus from belief and identity to the strategic use of moral language in political practice. Second, it proposes a model of conscience as a depolarizing political technology that enables a liberal-pluralist reconfiguration of opposition politics under conditions of ideological fragmentation.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Analytical Framework

This study conceptualizes conscience as a political technology that operates through specific mechanisms shaping political discourse and practice. Building on discourse theory

and political theology, it approaches conscience not merely as a moral or ethical category but as a performative and strategic resource that reconfigures the relationship between legitimacy, subjectivity, and political authority.

Analytically, the study adopts a dual framework. First, it employs rhetorical analysis to examine how conscience is framed as a source of legitimacy within political discourse and how this framing rearticulates the relationship between divine authority, individual subjectivity, and political power. This combined approach enables the study to move beyond descriptive discourse analysis and to theorize conscience as a mediating dispositif between the religious and the secular.

2.2. Case Selection: Kılıçdaroğlu as a Critical Case

This study adopts a qualitative case study design and selects Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu as a critical case for examining the operation of conscience as a heterodox political technology in contemporary Turkish politics. His political trajectory—from a technocratic bureaucratic background to the leadership of the Republican People's Party (RPP)—positions him at the intersection of state rationality, opposition politics, and evolving religion–politics relations.

Following his rise to party leadership in 2010, Kılıçdaroğlu initiated a significant transformation within the RPP, shifting it from a rigidly secularist and nationalist orientation toward a more socially inclusive and electorally pragmatic political actor (Özkan 2024). Central to this transformation is a rearticulation of religion in political discourse, in which individual belief and moral values are foregrounded rather than excluded or instrumentalized through identity-based mobilization.

This makes Kılıçdaroğlu a particularly suitable case for the present study. Rather than employing religion as a marker of collective identity, his discourse mobilizes conscience as a non-institutional, individualized, and universalizable moral resource. In doing so, it provides a critical empirical site for analyzing how moral vocabularies function as political technologies that reconfigure legitimacy, subject formation, and ideological boundaries under conditions of polarization.

2.3. Data and Method

This study employs qualitative discourse analysis to examine how conscience functions as a political principle within opposition discourse in the context of a polarized democratic environment. Focusing on the Republican People's Party (RPP) during Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's leadership, the research analyzes strategically selected public speeches, party documents, and key political statements between 2010 and 2023.

The corpus consists of approximately 35 speeches and public statements, selected based on their explicit and repeated reference to conscience, justice, and moral authority. The selection prioritizes texts that gained public visibility and political significance, ensuring both thematic relevance and contextual representativeness. Three core thematic clusters were identified: (1) conscience as divine voice, (2) conscience as judicial authority, and (3) conscience as popular resistance.

The analysis follows an inductive–deductive coding strategy. In the first stage, the corpus was coded inductively to identify recurring semantic patterns, metaphors, and normative claims associated with conscience. In the second stage, these patterns were interpreted through a theoretically informed lens, enabling the identification of conscience as a mediating category between the religious and the secular.

3. Theoretical Framework: Conscience Between Religion and Political Authority

Building on the conceptual foundations laid in the introduction, this section situates conscience within a longer intellectual history before theorizing its operation as a political technology. While traditionally associated with divine authority, Enlightenment thought redefined conscience as a subjective domain grounded in individual judgment (Taylor 1989, pp. 159–76; Schneewind 1998, pp. 3–12). Despite this apparent privatization, conscience has never been confined to the personal sphere. Rather, it has historically occupied a contested position at the intersection of religion and politics, where it has been both regulated by authority and mobilized as a resource of resistance (Mahoney 2021).

Classical and medieval traditions often subordinated conscience to institutional authority. As Asad (1993) demonstrates, the Church's efforts to distinguish orthodoxy from heresy entailed disciplining individual belief and situating truth within authorized structures rather than personal conviction. Casuistical traditions further institutionalized conscience by embedding it within systems of expert judgment (Leites 2002). In this sense, conscience was not simply an inner voice but a domain shaped and governed by external authority. Within this pre-Reformation framework, two figures merit particular attention for their lasting influence on the theology of conscience. Augustine of Hippo elaborated one of the earliest systematic treatments of conscience as a moral faculty oriented toward divine truth. For Augustine, conscience (*conscientia*) functioned as an interior witness—a site where the soul encountered the law of God inscribed within the heart (Romans 2: 15). Crucially, however, Augustine did not treat conscience as autonomous: its proper formation depended on its alignment with divine and ecclesiastical authority, and he addressed letters to those in political power urging them to govern in accordance with this divinely formed moral faculty (Markus 1988). This position established a foundational tension between conscience as inner witness and conscience as an object requiring external formation and correction. Thomas Aquinas further systematized this tension within scholastic moral theology. For Aquinas, conscience (*synderesis* as the habitual knowledge of first principles, and *conscientia* as its application to particular acts) was not merely an emotional or devotional faculty but a rational capacity that could err and therefore required right formation through reason, Scripture, and the teaching authority of the Church (Aquinas 1981, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, Q. 19). A mistaken conscience, on his account, still bound the individual—yet an erroneous conscience formed through culpable ignorance carried moral responsibility. This framework meant that the right of conscience was always conditional: legitimate only insofar as it was properly formed within institutional and rational structures. It is precisely this conditional and institutionally dependent conception of conscience that the Reformation—and, as this article argues, Kılıçdaroğlu's heterodox political theology—sought to challenge and displace.

The Reformation marked a decisive shift by relocating conscience within the individual subject. Reformers such as Martin Luther emphasized the sovereignty of individual judgment against ecclesiastical authority, thereby transforming conscience into a site of resistance to institutional power (Brown 1995). Similarly, figures such as William Penn articulated conscience as an inner “divine instinct” that could not be subordinated to external authority, framing it as both a theological and political principle (Dunn 1967). This transformation laid the groundwork for modern conceptions of conscience as an autonomous moral capacity.

By the twentieth century, conscience had become widely recognized as a universal human faculty, institutionalized through frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 1 of the Declaration defines human beings as endowed with reason and conscience, elevating it to a foundational principle of moral and political equality (Strohm

2011). At the same time, modern political theory has continued to grapple with the tension between protecting conscience and governing its public implications (Brennan 2006).

Yet, despite this extensive literature, conscience is predominantly treated either as a moral capacity requiring protection or as a site of resistance against authority. What remains underexplored is how conscience operates within political discourse itself—not merely as a value, but as a mechanism that actively structures political meaning and practice.

To address this gap, this article conceptualizes conscience as a heterodox political technology. Drawing on Foucauldian discourse theory, political technologies can be understood as historically situated assemblages of practices that organize perception, shape subjectivity, and guide political action (Foucault 1980; Dean 1999). Unlike ideologies, which operate at the level of belief, political technologies function through regularized discursive and performative practices that produce political subjects and configure the field of possible action. In this sense, conscience functions not only as a moral category but as a strategic *dispositif* that intervenes in the relationship between religion and politics.

Its heterodox character lies in its ability to displace both institutional religion and rigid secularism. Rather than grounding legitimacy in ecclesiastical authority or excluding religion from the public sphere, conscience reconfigures belief as an individualized and non-institutional resource. This aligns with broader analyses of heterodoxy as a mode of challenging established boundaries of religious authority and political order (Asad 1993; Casanova 1994).

As a political technology, conscience operates through two interrelated mechanisms. First, it functions as a mode of legitimation, redefining the source of political authority in moral rather than institutional or identity-based terms and contributes to subject formation by constructing individuals as morally responsible agents capable of judgment beyond collective identities. Second, it enables discursive alignment by providing a shared moral vocabulary that can traverse ideological and religious divides. This second mechanism resonates with Rawls's notion of the proviso: citizens may introduce non-public reasons—including religious or comprehensive moral doctrines—into public deliberation, provided that public reasons are eventually offered in support of the same positions (Rawls 1997). Conscience, as deployed in Kılıçdaroğlu's discourse, operates in precisely this register: it draws on a moral vocabulary with religious resonance while simultaneously presenting itself as universally accessible, thereby fulfilling—at least performatively—the Rawlsian requirement of public justifiability.

This conceptualization allows us to move beyond treating conscience as a passive ethical principle and instead analyze how it is actively mobilized within political discourse. In polarized contexts, where political competition is structured through antagonistic identities, such a technology has the potential to reframe conflict in less exclusionary terms. The following sections examine how this theoretical framework is operationalized in the political discourse of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu.

4. Results

The empirical analysis demonstrates that conscience is not merely invoked as a moral value but systematically deployed across different contexts in ways that correspond to the three mechanisms outlined above. Although conscience is seen as an area of personal conviction and belief, the cultural climate that gives it life should not be overlooked. Discussions on the meaning of conscience during the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reflect the importance of cultural contexts. When Mrs. Roosevelt and her committee came together to draft the Declaration in the 1940s, they encountered many debates about the concept of conscience. A key member of the committee, Dr. P. C. Chang, a Chinese playwright and diplomat, “persuaded the committee to adopt the Confucian

concept of liangxin [an inner moral disposition] as the content of the concept of conscience, so that the English term conscience in Article I of the Declaration is actually a translation of the Chinese liangxin" (Strohm 2011).

4.1. Conscience as Legitimation: Regrounding Political Authority Beyond Law and Sovereignty

An analysis of Kılıçdaroğlu's discourse reveals that conscience is primarily positioned above worldly structures such as power and law. In this context, the conceptualization of conscience as an emotion that exists in the inner world of the individual rather than a worldly power comes to the fore. Although conscience, which is above the power relations and political–legal arrangements of this world, is an individual emotion, it still has a universal value. Because, according to Kılıçdaroğlu, it is "the voice of God". According to Kılıçdaroğlu, who expresses this clearly in his answers to the questions "What does conscience mean?" and "What does conscientious conviction mean?", "conscientious conviction is the voice of God in our hearts" (CHP 2022a). This voice of God within the human being calls individuals to justice and directs them toward fairness. Kılıçdaroğlu said that some scientists also define the conscience as the voice of God. According to Kılıçdaroğlu, the conscience, which is the voice of God inside the human being, also "expresses a deep sense of justice in the heart of the human being" (CHP 2023a).

As the voice of God calling for justice, conscience is in front of the law. With this quality, conscience can reveal the attitude of not submitting to worldly powers in the individual, while it also signifies areas that are outside the control of the power of authority (Kılıncı 2012). A priority ranking between law and conscience is also encountered in the New Testament. In the Letter to the Romans 2:14–15, which emphasizes the conscience guiding nations without laws, the Christian call to conscience is seen against the written rules of the Romans supported by their worldly-political power. Conscience and its superiority are emphasized for an alternative religiosity against the power system that creates the conditions for experiencing religious truth (Asad 1993). Kılıçdaroğlu's attitude towards conscience acts in a similar manner, aiming to displace the discourse that political power has elevated to the status of truth. In other words, it is a conscience that is asserted against the law of power (Asad 1993), which systematically excludes, prohibits or makes certain discourses and practices as unthinkable as possible, while permitting, glorifying and placing certain other discourses at the level of sacred truth. Conscience does not give written orders, but for Kılıçdaroğlu, this divine voice against the unjust laws of worldly powers should be the first voice to be heard in judicial decisions. Stating that judges should listen to this voice when making their legal decisions, Kılıçdaroğlu said, "Conscience is above all else. Can a judge who does not act with his conscience be a judge?" Elsewhere, he expresses this by saying "the judiciary can only make a healthy decision in a free environment alone with its conscience" (Kılıçdaroğlu 2023). In this context, conscience decides whether a legal decision is fair or not. Moreover, according to him, "the name of the scale that weighs the sense of justice is conscience" (CHP 2020b).

In this context, conscience, which is considered to be free from power balances and power relations, is designed as a metaphysically based supreme justice mechanism that cannot be interfered with by political decisions. In fact, this mechanism seems to be completely closed to worldly powers. Because, according to him, whichever worldly power thinks that its own decision will establish justice is deeply mistaken. "There is no conscience in those who think that what they say constitutes justice" (CHP 2020b). The belief that the law based on the decision of the political will cannot realize justice forms the basis of his thinking in this context. According to Kılıçdaroğlu, "justice cannot be realized by passing laws. Justice must first be in the conscience of man" (CHP 2020c). Advocating that individuals listen to conscience—understood as the voice of God—and judge the law

accordingly may be seen as a sign of moral progress. However, elevating conscience to the status of sole authority in the choice of action and the evaluation of behavior risks representing a form of moral regression. This distinction between conscience as the ultimate authority and conscience as the sole authority stems from the concern that conscience is always radicalized. However, the motive that drives Kılıçdaroğlu's perspective is based on the idea that there is only one sphere of justice or law, and that conscience constitutes the basic structure on which this sphere is built, thus making it the sole authority. In this respect, Kılıçdaroğlu states that the decisions made by worldly centers can only be in accordance with justice and conscience under one condition, and while expressing this exception, he considers it possible if there is no external interference in the field of justice. For Kılıçdaroğlu (CHP 2023c), who defines the field of justice, which includes conscience, in a very normative way, the judge who will provide justice will be able to do so to the extent that he decides in line with principles such as conscience and the rule of law, which are components of the field of justice. Strohm issues a general warning against perspectives based on the right to act and decide according to conscience, including Kılıçdaroğlu's approach, which makes conscience one of the fundamental components of the judiciary. He emphasizes the importance of seeing conscience as "a starting point rather than a definitive end to deliberation" (Strohm 2011), which also constitutes the law. Brennan, who argues that the conscience of the voter and the elected politician should be given absolute priority in a democracy, also emphasizes the problems of giving conscience priority but making it the sole authority in decisions. He argues that both those who try to prevent its priority and those who want it to be the sole authority are a threat to democracy (Brennan 2006).

What is the significance of this overemphasis on the divine conscience over earthly authorities and political sovereignty by a representative of the political sphere? Is it possible to see this approach as the design of an alternative and specific form of religion-politics? Today, when we consider that divinity operates through the conscientious individual (Dunn 1967) or when we listen to the warnings that God walks on the wings of individual conscience discourses (Strohm 2011), it becomes clear that this approach Kılıçdaroğlu is trying to put forward is an alternative form of faith politics. The statements of Yüksel Taşkın, who also served as RPP Deputy Chairman, give us an idea of where this alternative form of faith politics originates from. Stating that the Ottoman policy of making the Sunni interpretation of Islam dominant in the 15th century led to the spread of heterodox religious understandings that emphasized equality and tolerance in Anatolia, Taşkın (2016) argues that social democracy, in which the RPP is a part, is fed by this heterodox religiosity. Thus, it is clear that Kılıçdaroğlu offers a heterodox alternative to the orthodox religion-politics discourse that has turned Sunnism into an apparatus of governance. This heterodox approach is primarily predisposed to a way of thinking that the external horizontal dimension of religion is contrary to natural behavior based on sympathy and is a betrayal of true inner religion (Douglas 2007). In this respect, he is opposed to religion being turned into an administrative tool to create a distinctive identity. On the contrary, it emphasizes a religiosity that is free from the yoke of worldly authorities and is only experienced individually, and it does this through the concept of conscience.

Discussing the main motivation for emphasizing conscience in opposition to the yoke of authority, historian Henry Charles Lea sees this history as typical of the Puritans (Leites 2002). Conscience here is a natural and dispositional faculty by which one judges the moral goodness or badness of one's actions [...] conscience is therefore sovereign and cannot be subjected to any authority or authoritative external criterion. It advances a type of subjectivity that appeals to an inner God and thus opposes accepted authority (Tully 2002). Kılıçdaroğlu's puritanical stance, which argues that conscience, as this divine voice that all people are capable of hearing, directs the people to justice against worldly authorities,

marks a kind of transformation in the political theology of the Republic. In the eyes of Kılıçdaroğlu, who sees the power of the worldly-political sovereign to go beyond the law and not to be bound by it due to its legislative nature, the people are no longer seen primarily as the source of sovereignty, but as the source of justice and conscience. In other words, when the political cadres of the republic, who transferred sovereignty to the people, move to the opposition position, the people are now seen as the source of divine justice in order to draw a limit to worldly sovereignty.

When the “people of conscience” is codified as the source of justice instead of being the source of sovereignty, it is made an authority that cannot tolerate the injustices caused by the sovereign power and will judge them (CHP 2023a). Although he fully believes that the final judgment will eventually take place, Kılıçdaroğlu believes that it will take time. The main reason for this is that the conscience of the people has been numbed and silenced in the face of worldly authority and sovereign power. Stating that it is his duty to raise and reveal this numbed and silenced public conscience, Kılıçdaroğlu is looking for a way to put flesh and bones on the conscience and turn it into a single voice as a point of resistance (Indyturk 2022). In another place, Kılıçdaroğlu expresses this as “creating a justice front against oppression”, which is a movement for universal justice and conscience (CHP 2020a). These discursive moves collectively illustrate the first mechanism of conscience as political technology: legitimization. By relocating the source of authority from sovereign power to divinely grounded individual conscience, Kılıçdaroğlu constructs an alternative moral basis for political judgment that operates independently of institutional or legal structures.

4.2. Conscience as Discursive Alignment: Bridging Religious and Secular Audiences

It should be noted that it is quite difficult to distinguish between religious and political concepts in Kılıçdaroğlu’s discourse, as he frequently uses expressions such as “the pursuit of justice for the oppressed against the worldly powers”, “standing against oppression”, “not being a mute devil but being the voice of the people and the truth”. In this context, it is clear that he is the spokesperson of a certain form of religion-politics. “We are people of faith. We believe in the people. We glorify our faith. We live our faith in our inner world and we know very well that those who remain silent in the face of injustice are mute devils. We will never be dumb, we will defend our struggle against all injustices with human determination, honor and pride” (Kılıçdaroğlu 2020). Elsewhere, Kılıçdaroğlu emphasizes the divine character of conscience, justice and law, again reflecting his unique religion-politics style. According to him, “justice actually means conscience. Doing something right, not hurting the other person, acting fairly, being virtuous. Right, law and justice also originate from here. In fact, right is also one of the names of Allah. We say Allah Almighty is right. Law is the multiplication, the plural of right. Justice is already formed by the combination of these. Therefore, it is a concept that appeals to everyone’s conscience (Cengiz 2017). The meaning of conscience that Kılıçdaroğlu presents is deliberately broad, reflecting his effort as a politician to remain inclusive of all voters. According to Casanova (1994), who discusses the form of belief of today’s people, the modern individual tends to believe that all religions and all individuals worship the same god, albeit with different names and in different languages, and that they reserve the right to worship him in their own languages. He sees Rousseau’s “religion of humanity... without temples, altars and rituals” and Thomas Paine’s “my mind is my church” as paradigmatic expressions of this modern individual piety in “high culture”. It is on the basis of this form of belief of modern man that Kılıçdaroğlu tries to expand the field of the heterodox politics of faith.

Kılıçdaroğlu stands out as a charismatic leader in this struggle to broaden the religious-political front, defining their struggle as a struggle for justice, conscience and right against oppression and stating that he is personally responsible for broadening this front. According

to him, “whoever stood with us as a party or individually against oppression in favor of right, law and justice, this success belongs to all of us and this success is the success of everyone. Let me put it clearly; if this change that has reached 25 million is not enough, the failure is mine, and the duty to produce new changes that will increase this number is mine. My task today is to manage the process that will increase the number of honest, conscientious and righteous masses of my country without sacrificing even one person out of 25 million” (CHP 2023b).

The aim of this novel articulation of religion and politics does not appear to be a continuation of the RPP’s traditional project of modernizing and nationalizing religion. Rather, it points toward a form of religiosity without identity markers, symbols, or social boundaries—one that generates solidarity without producing division. Against the social destructiveness of religious symbolic apparatuses, which have been skillfully used by the JDP in Turkish politics to emphasize the difference in its electorate, to raise awareness of this difference, to preserve it and to build an identity (Cohen 1985), the ‘sanctity of conscience’ (Asad 1993) is made a principle by Kılıçdaroğlu. In this context, “politics that puts ethnic identity and beliefs at the center of politics is not a politics we can accept. A politics that puts beliefs and ethnic identity at the center of politics is a politics that dynamites division in society. We will endeavor to be together, not apart” (Kılıçdaroğlu 2020).

Kılıçdaroğlu also evaluated the political use of religion in a way that creates separation and difference through the Presidency of Religious Affairs. According to Kılıçdaroğlu, this institution should have prevented religion from being involved in politics, but it has failed to fulfill this function. However, it should be able to do more. It should be inclusive and prevent religion from becoming a political material that creates identity, difference and separation. According to Kılıçdaroğlu, the Directorate of Religious Affairs, which has failed to fulfill this function, should be reformed (Turkish Policy 2010). In the 2011 election manifesto titled Country of Freedom and Hope, Everyone’s Turkey, this reform will be mentioned and it will be promised that the Presidency of Religious Affairs will be organized in a way that will be sensitive to the demands of all beliefs and sects by considering pluralism of beliefs and with an understanding of equality (CHP 2011).

Similarly, Kılıçdaroğlu is fundamentally opposed to the nature of religion classes that involve identity construction based on difference. For Kılıçdaroğlu, religion classes will not be compulsory and will include the common aspects of all religions and the parts that are for the conscience. The RPP’s position on compulsory religion classes in schools is that they should be abolished. “We will abolish this course and replace it with historically and culturally based courses that will cover all religions and beliefs in line with the basic provisions of our Constitution,” Kılıçdaroğlu said, adding that in a secular regime, schools cannot be used to propagandize beliefs (Turkish Policy 2010). Altunoğlu (2014) argues that secularism has lost its characteristic of being one of the central themes of the elites of the Kılıçdaroğlu era and the party’s discourse on religion. For example, “secularism as the guarantee of beliefs” and “secularism as the non-interference of politics in people’s beliefs” are the main meanings Kılıçdaroğlu attributes to this concept. In this case, secularism is positioned beyond the separation of religion and politics, and means that politics should not interfere in the beliefs of society. Kılıçdaroğlu expresses this elsewhere as follows: “We are a party that believes in freedom of thought and expression, we are a party that believes in freedom of religion and conscience. We do not want anyone to be marginalized. Whoever lives in this geography has a place above our heads. The political institution cannot assume the duty of questioning their beliefs and identity (Rudaw 2024). This approach, which does not see a problem with citizens bringing their religion and beliefs into the public sphere, problematizes the subject matter of beliefs brought into the public sphere by politicians. Kılıçdaroğlu sees it as destructive for society when the political institution

makes these beliefs a tool for certain political goals, and in doing so turns them into an identity material. In this context, secularism is made the basic rule of respecting everyone's beliefs (Kılıçdaroğlu 2020). It is used in the sense that politics should not interfere with faith and that the use of religion to create a distinctive identity that creates difference should be controlled.

At the 1931 Congress, the RPP included the concept of conscience in its party program along with the principle of secularism, emphasizing that religion is only a matter of conscience and declaring that it would keep religious thoughts separate from state and world affairs and politics (CHP 1931). In this context, there was a tradition in the RPP tradition of using the concepts of secularism and conscience as a conceptual set serving the same purpose; however, Kılıçdaroğlu placed conscience at the center of education, law, and politics, thereby marking a distinctively new position within this tradition. While conscience was a means of making secularism dominant in the early Republican period, Kılıçdaroğlu has turned secularism into a means of making conscience dominant. Because conscience has no drawbacks in terms of separating society and creating an independent identity. When Rousseau (1978) makes a distinction between “human religion” and “citizen religion”, the thesis that republics cannot be long-lasting without advancing and protecting the citizen religion seems to be reversed by Kılıçdaroğlu, who emphasizes the importance for the continuity of society of the Republic's domination of the “human religion” based on conscience. Conscience, which Kılıçdaroğlu sees as the aspect of religion that does not segregate society, emerges as a principle that must be defended politically. In this context, there is nothing wrong with conscience being the main determinant of political action. For example, Kılıçdaroğlu suggested that citizens should listen to the voice of their conscience while fulfilling their political duties, (CHP 2022b) while elsewhere he stated that the religious penalty of not bringing one's conscience into politics and making it the basis of the political sphere is heavy (Gazetekritik 2017). Taken together, these examples demonstrate the second mechanism: discursive alignment. By invoking conscience as a vocabulary simultaneously accessible to pious believers and secular citizens, Kılıçdaroğlu enables cross-ideological communication without requiring adherence to a single religious or secular framework—thereby operationalizing conscience as a bridge across the polarized political field.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that conscience, as articulated in Kılıçdaroğlu's discourse, operates not merely as a moral reference point but as a heterodox political technology that reconfigures the relationship between religion, subjectivity, and political legitimacy. Rather than positioning conscience as a private ethical faculty or a purely religious category, the analysis demonstrates how it is mobilized as a mediating dispositif that traverses the boundaries between the secular and the sacred. In doing so, conscience enables a rearticulation of political authority that neither relies on institutional religion nor fully conforms to secularist exclusion.

This heterodox configuration is particularly significant in the context of polarized democracies, where political competition is often structured through rigid identity boundaries and antagonistic moral claims. In such contexts, dominant political logics tend to oscillate between two poles: assertive secularism, which marginalizes religious expressions from the public sphere, and majoritarianism, which instrumentalizes religion as a marker of collective identity. The discourse of conscience analyzed in this study disrupts this binary by relocating the source of legitimacy from both institutional authority and collective identity to the morally endowed individual subject.

From this perspective, conscience can be understood as a political technology of depolarization. Its depolarizing capacity emerges through its ability to reframe political conflict in moral rather than identity-based terms. First, by grounding legitimacy in an inner moral register rather than collective identity, conscience weakens the rigid boundaries that structure polarized political fields, while shifting the locus of political judgment from group belonging to individual responsibility, thereby reducing the salience of antagonistic identity categories. Second, as a discursive resource, conscience enables communication across ideological divides by invoking a shared moral vocabulary that does not require adherence to a specific religious or secular framework. In this sense, conscience does not eliminate conflict but transforms its terms, making it less exclusionary and more negotiable.

Moreover, the strategic deployment of conscience contributes to the transformation of political discourse from one centered on loyalty, threat, and collective identity to one oriented toward ethical reflection and moral accountability. This shift does not eliminate conflict but reframes it within a less antagonistic and more deliberative register. As such, conscience functions as a mechanism through which oppositional politics can challenge hegemonic narratives without reproducing the polarizing logics they seek to contest.

This reconfiguration also marks a departure from the dominant mode of value politics in the Turkish context. Value-laden political discourse in Turkey has frequently been associated with moral regulation and the policing of secular lifestyles—most notably under JDP governance, which has mobilized Islamic moral norms as instruments of social discipline (Öniş 2007). What Kılıçdaroğlu's conscience discourse offers is a structurally different translation of ethical values into political life: one that invokes moral vocabulary without prescribing behavioural conformity or enforcing collective identity boundaries. In this sense, the article contributes to broader debates on how ethical values may enter political discourse in non-repressive ways—not as regulatory norms imposed on subjects, but as reflexive moral resources available to them.

Importantly, this analysis also suggests that the political efficacy of conscience is contingent upon its ambiguous positioning between transcendence and universality. Its resonance derives from its ability to be simultaneously perceived as divinely inspired and universally accessible, thereby appealing to both religious and secular audiences. This dual character allows conscience to operate as a bridge rather than a boundary, facilitating a form of political communication that cuts across ideological divides.

However, the depolarizing potential of conscience is not unconditional. Its effectiveness depends on the willingness of political actors and audiences to recognize moral arguments as legitimate grounds for political engagement. In contexts where identity-based polarization is deeply entrenched and moral language is perceived as strategic manipulation rather than sincere expression, appeals to conscience may fail to bridge divisions and may even be reinterpreted as partisan rhetoric. Moreover, when political competition is structured primarily through institutional or material conflicts, the discursive power of conscience may remain limited. These limitations suggest that conscience operates as a contingent rather than universally effective political technology. Beyond these contextual constraints, the deployment of conscience as a political technology carries structural risks that deserve critical attention. First, the invocation of conscience as 'the voice of God' risks a paradoxical re-sacralization of political authority: while it challenges majoritarian religious claims, it simultaneously grounds legitimacy in a transcendent register that is, by definition, non-negotiable and immune to deliberative contestation. Second, and relatedly, when conscience is elevated to the status of ultimate moral arbiter—as Strohm (2011) and Brennan (2006) both caution—it may undermine rather than support democratic deliberation by privileging individual moral certainty over institutional accountability. Third, the universalist framing of conscience may obscure real power asymmetries: who gets to define

what ‘conscience’ demands, and whose moral vocabulary is accepted as universal, are inherently political questions that a conscience-based discourse tends to naturalize rather than interrogate. These tensions do not invalidate the depolarizing function of conscience, but they indicate that its emancipatory potential is inseparable from the conditions of its articulation.

While grounded in the Turkish case, the conceptualization of conscience as a heterodox political technology offers broader analytical leverage for understanding opposition strategies in other polarized democracies. Similar moral vocabularies may function as tools of depolarization in contexts where conventional ideological frameworks fail to produce inclusive forms of political belonging. Future research may build on this framework by comparatively examining how such moral categories are mobilized across different political traditions and cultural settings, and under what conditions they succeed or fail in mitigating polarization.

In this sense, conscience does not simply express moral content but functions as a technology that structures how political actors perceive, evaluate, and act within polarized environments.

6. Conclusions

This article has argued that Kılıçdaroğlu’s discourse of conscience constitutes not merely a moral appeal but a heterodox political technology that reconfigures the relationship between religion and politics. By relocating the source of legitimacy from institutional religion and sovereign authority to the morally endowed individual, conscience operates as a mediating dispositif that reshapes how political authority is justified and contested.

This model departs from both assertive secularism and majoritarian instrumentalization of religion. Rather than excluding religion from the public sphere or mobilizing it as an identity marker, it reframes belief as an individualized, non-institutional, and non-divisive resource grounded in conscience. In doing so, it enables a form of political engagement that challenges hegemonic narratives without reproducing rigid identity-based antagonisms.

Conceptually, the study contributes to political theory by theorizing conscience as a context-dependent technology of depolarization. Its effects do not lie in eliminating conflict but in transforming the moral grammar through which conflict is articulated. However, this depolarizing capacity remains contingent: it depends on the recognition of moral claims as credible rather than strategic, and on specific configurations of political trust and institutional legitimacy.

The framework developed here extends beyond the Turkish case, offering comparative leverage for analyzing how moral vocabularies function as political technologies across different polarized contexts.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

RPP Republican People's Party

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