

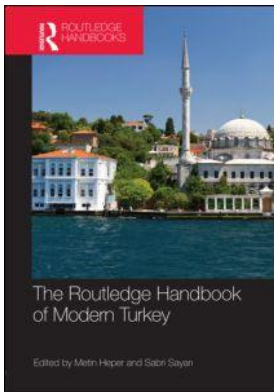
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POLITICAL PARTIES

Sabri Sayar

Political parties have been in existence in Turkey for more than a century. Since their emergence during the final years of the Ottoman Empire and in the first decade of the twentieth century, parties have remained on the political stage almost continuously.¹ The only major exception to this long-term trend occurred in the aftermath of the 1980 military coup, when a ban imposed on all existing parties formally left Turkey a “partyless” state for nearly three years. Although Turkey has a relatively long history of parties, it has a more recent history of democracy. Until the transition to democracy in the immediate aftermath of World War II, political parties functioned within nondemocratic regimes and in the absence of mass political participation. The transformation of Turkey’s political life and the birth of a competitive multiparty system in the late 1940s significantly expanded the scope of party politics and the role of parties in the political process.

Stages of party development

The historical origins and development of political parties in Turkey can be broadly divided into three major stages. The role of the parties in politics and society has varied considerably in these different stages. However, Turkish party politics have also displayed certain continuities over the years despite major transformations in the country’s political regime and socioeconomic conditions.

The first stage of party development was the creation of parties in the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century. The origins of parties in Western democracies are commonly associated with the rise of parliaments and the extension of suffrage. In the Ottoman Empire, the opening of the first parliament in 1876 was not accompanied by the emergence of organized parties, since the absolutism of the rulers remained in force and the parliament was closed after only one year (Devereux, 1963). Following this short-lived experiment with representative government, political opposition to autocracy took the form of outright conspiratorial activities by organized groups until the Young Turk Revolution of 1908. The reopening of the Ottoman parliament on the basis of limited suffrage and the inauguration of the Second Constitutional Era (1908–18) played decisive roles in the rise of the first party organizations. The democratic stirrings in the country in the immediate aftermath of the Young Turk Revolution facilitated the emergence of parties, which were formed by the rival elites competing for political power. The most important political party of the period, the Committee

of Union and Progress (CUP), evolved out of a former conspiratorial society. The Second Constitutional Era also witnessed the beginning of party competition for election to the parliament (Tunaya, 1952; Demir, 2007). However, following the coup of 1913, the governing CUP suppressed all political opposition and monopolized political power throughout World War I.

The first stage of party development was largely based on intra-elite competition for power without meaningful mass participation, due to limited suffrage. Nevertheless, in addition to facilitating the emergence of the first political parties in the modern history of Turkey, the Second Constitutional Era also ushered in new institutions and processes such as cabinet responsibility to the legislature, organization of regularly held elections, election campaigning by competing parties, formation of party groups in the legislature, and recruitment of parliamentary and ministerial elites through the political parties (Rustow, 1966: 117). Moreover, the gradual extension of the party organizations, notably that of the CUP, from the capital, Istanbul, to the provinces in Anatolia and parts of the Balkans and the Middle East under Ottoman rule represented an important step toward the growth of party activities throughout the empire. As Rustow notes, the establishment of party organizations in the provincial small towns was largely accomplished by the recruitment of local notables and by the “systematic use of patronage and economic regulation” (Rustow, 1966: 117). Patronage distribution in return for political support and the influence of rural notables in local party organizations were to remain important characteristics of party politics in Turkey in the years to come.

The second stage of party development began following the end of the Ottoman Empire after World War I and the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk). The transition from an empire to a republic was not accompanied by a transition to democracy as well. Instead, single-party authoritarian rule became the political regime of the newly established republic. One of Mustafa Kemal’s first acts after he became president of the republic was the formation of the Republican People’s Party (RPP). The RPP, the local organization of which was largely based on the remnants of the CUP and the Defense of Rights Associations which had been formed during the national War of Independence (1919–22), remained the “official” party of the authoritarian regime for the next three decades. The RPP was closely identified with the state apparatus and functioned “primarily as a mechanism for social control from above” (Frey, 1965: 304). In the words of its founder and undisputed leader, the RPP would be “a school for the education of the common people” (Atatürk, 1952: 97). The main goal of this “school” was to disseminate the ideas and values associated with Atatürk’s modernization and Westernization program. Additionally, the RPP served as the main channel for political recruitment to the Turkish Grand National Assembly as well as local and municipal administrative bodies. Turkey’s authoritarian regime experimented with some degree of limited pluralism and sanctioned the formation of two opposition parties in 1924 and 1930. However, both were closed by the authorities after a brief existence.

The third stage began with the transition from authoritarian rule to democracy at the end of World War II. President İsmet İnönü’s decision in 1945 to permit the formation of opposition parties and the regular holding of free and fair elections was a major turning point in Turkey’s recent political history and the development of party politics. Although there were intense debates within the governing RPP about the democratization process until 1948, opposition parties were formed as early as 1945 and competed in the parliamentary elections in 1946 (Karpas, 1959).² The most significant development of the third stage consisted of the rise of a competitive multiparty system and the establishment of a mass base for party politics. The process of party formation during the late 1940s proceeded at two levels. At the parliamentary level, a factional split from the RPP by four parliamentarians in 1946 led to the formation of

the main opposition Democratic Party (DP). At the level of the provincial small towns and villages, the process of party formation was facilitated by the politicization of existing factional rivalries between leading notable families and their clientelist networks, which led to the rapid extension of party organizations throughout the country (Sayan, 1975).

Two opposing trends concerning party development have continued to characterize electoral politics throughout the more than six decades since the transformation of Turkish politics after World War II. On the one hand, the role of parties in fulfilling several key functions in democracies, such as interest aggregation, political representation, and electoral mobilization, has increased substantially in comparison to the predemocratic periods. As the scope and importance of party activities expanded, the centrality of parties became one of the major distinguishing characteristics of Turkish political life. Despite the fact that parties have often been criticized for their shortcomings in resolving pressing social and economic problems when in government, their legitimacy as the founding blocks of Turkish democracy has not been widely challenged. On the other hand, however, the development of parties and the party system has been repeatedly interrupted by military interventions in politics. The political engineering efforts of the officers—ousting popularly elected parties from office, banning parties and their leaders, and vetoing candidates to the parliament—have undermined the strengthening of parties, the stabilization of the party system, and the consolidation of democracy. However, it should also be noted that the strategies pursued by rival party elites during periods of deep political and economic crisis—most notably their failure to reach an accommodation to prevent the escalation of the crisis prior to the 1980 coup—have also contributed to the breakdowns of Turkish democracy through military interventions.

The third stage of party development has witnessed the rapid proliferation of parties. From the mid-1940s to the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, a total of 224 parties were formally registered with the authorities after their completion of the legal requirements for establishing party organizations (Kaynar, 2007: 28), but the majority of them have not survived, due to their failure to attract meaningful political support or as the result of merging with other parties. Additionally, the lives of some parties have been cut short either by the military interventions or by decisions of the Constitutional Court, although some of the parties that were banned managed to reemerge on the political scene under new names after a brief interlude. Turkey has also witnessed the demise of several parties due to their loss of electoral support. Consequently, the recent history of party politics in Turkey is notable for the disappearance of what were once major parties and their replacement by new ones, as well as by the frequent changes and rotation of party names and acronyms.

The institutional framework of parties

Party research literature has shown that political institutions can exert strong influence on the structure and dynamics of political parties and party systems. In particular, studies have emphasized that the formal organization of the state (unitary versus federal), the defining features of the political system (parliamentarism versus presidentialism), and the type of electoral laws (plurality or proportional representation) can have significant effects on parties and party competition (Müller, 2002). In recent years, there has been a growing trend in many countries, especially the newer democracies in Latin America and eastern Europe, toward state regulation of party activities through constitutional requirements, special political party laws, and public control of party finances (Biezen and Kopecky, 2007).

Political institutions, state-party linkages, and electoral rules have had significant consequences for political parties in Turkey. The major institutional characteristics of the country

include a unitary state and a parliamentary system. In countries that have federalism, such as Canada, Germany, and the United States, parties tend to split their resources and activities between the national and the subnational levels. In Turkey's highly centralized unitary state, parties have traditionally concentrated their efforts and activities at the national level in their attempts to shape government policies. However, as the political role and influence of the municipal administrations in large cities such as Istanbul and Ankara have grown significantly in recent years, parties have also begun to devote more attention to expanding their electoral and organizational strength at the subnational level. Since the establishment of the Republic in 1923, Turkey has had a parliamentary system. While the 1961 Constitution expanded the powers of the legislature at the expense of the political executive, the 1982 Constitution (currently in use) reversed this trend and provided the executive branch with powers it does not have in most parliamentary democracies. Nevertheless, in addition to its central role in law-making, the Turkish Grand National Assembly in Ankara constitutes a major arena for party politics and an institutional battleground in government-opposition encounters.

The regulation and management of party activities by the state has been a significant feature of party politics in Turkey. The formation of new parties following political liberalization in the late 1940s took place under the close supervision of the state. A number of newly formed leftist and pro-Islamist parties were banned by the authorities (Karpat, 1959). Since then, the state has sought to regulate and manage political parties through constitutional provisions, a special political party law, and public control of party finances. Political parties were formally recognized in the 1961 and 1982 Constitutions as "indispensable parts of democratic political life." Both constitutions include specific provisions concerning the registration of new parties, qualifications for party membership, and party finance. Additionally, the reasons for banning parties are also described at length in the constitutions. They include activities that endanger the independence of the country, its territorial integrity and indivisibility, and the democratic and secular principles of the Republic. Several additional reasons that were given in the 1961 and 1982 Constitutions for banning parties, such as "advocating class or group dictatorship," were removed through amendments in later years.

A number of democratic countries have special legislation or a "party law" to regulate party activities (Janda, 2005). Party laws constitute "the most direct form of state intervention in party politics" (Müller, 2002: 262). Turkey also has a political party law, which was first enacted in 1965. It was revised extensively in 1983, and has been amended several times since then. In essence, the Political Parties Law provides detailed regulations governing party structures and intraparty processes. It also specifies the conditions under which political parties may be banned. As in the case of the constitutional provisions concerning the reasons for the prohibition of parties, the special legislation regarding parties stipulates that parties which allow their members to engage in activities that endanger the unity and territorial integrity of Turkey or undermine the secular foundations of the Republic can be declared unconstitutional and closed.

The Constitutional Court has been the principal political institution through which the state has banned parties. Since its establishment in 1961, the court has closed 25 parties. In a majority of the cases, parties were closed for violating the constitutional and legal principles concerning Turkey's indivisibility and its secular institutions. Consequently, the main targets of party bans have been the pro-Kurdish and pro-Islamist parties. While the former have been closed for supporting separatism and maintaining ties with the Kurdish-based terrorist organization, the PKK, the latter have been banned for undermining secularism and seeking to expand religion's role in Turkish society and politics. Political parties have also been banned in a number of democratic countries in Western Europe. For example, West Germany banned the Communist and Nazi parties in the 1950s, and in more recent years the Spanish government closed the

Basque nationalist Batasuna Party for its ties to the terrorist group ETA. However, banning political parties has not been widely practiced in most liberal democracies. What makes the Turkish case unusual is the frequency with which parties have been banned, especially during the 1990s, a period when the Turkish state faced the twin challenges of heightened activism by the PKK and the growing electoral popularity of the pro-Islamist parties (Sayan, 2007).

The public financing of political parties represents another means by which states regulate political parties. Although subsidizing parties from the coffers of the state is a relatively recent development, it has quickly become an established practice. At present, parties in nearly three-quarters of the democracies in the world receive subsidies from the state (with New Zealand, Switzerland, and the United States being the main exceptions) (Biezen and Kopecky, 2007). Political parties in Turkey are also supported financially by the state. According to the Political Parties Law, the state provides financial support to parties that have received at least 7 percent of the total valid votes in the most recent elections. It is estimated that approximately 90 percent of the income of political parties comes directly from state funds (SGI, 2011). As in the case of other democracies, the increasing importance of public subsidies to political parties in Turkey underscores the growing interdependence between parties and the state.

There are no empirical studies about the effects that state subsidies have had on the electoral popularity or the organizational strength of political parties in Turkey. However, since state funding constitutes a large share of the income of individual parties and since it is allocated disproportionately, it is possible to argue that public funding has made the larger parties more competitive in elections than it has the minor ones. The main problem regarding the financial support of parties by the state concerns the near-absence of transparency and effective regulation of party expenditures (Gençkaya, 2000). Most importantly, no legislation exists concerning the financing of election campaigns, nor are there any specific recordkeeping requirements for contributions to political parties. Similarly, the expenditures of individual candidates during election campaigns are not recorded and monitored. Although the Political Parties Law stipulates that political parties' finances are to be audited by the Constitutional Court, this has not prevented parties and individual candidates for parliament from using unrecorded "soft money" contributions in their election campaigns. A major international organization that follows trends and practices in party financing around the world includes Turkey in the group of countries where party financing is "non-transparent, poorly monitored, and violations not vigorously deterred" in its 2011 report (SGI, 2011).

Electoral systems constitute another major factor in the institutional framework of political parties. The rules concerning the translation of votes into seats can give some parties proportionally more seats than their votes, allocate fewer seats to their competitors, and deny others from gaining representation in the legislature (Müller, 2002: 250). Research on the political effects of electoral systems has shown that they can play an important role in the structuring of party systems and voter preferences (Lijphart, 1994). Electoral laws have had significant effects on party politics in Turkey. Following the transition to multiparty politics, Turkey adopted the plurality system with multiple-member electoral constituencies. This choice by the incumbent RPP reflected its belief that it would be the main beneficiary of an electoral system that normally produces a large parliamentary majority for the largest party. The plurality electoral system did in fact lead to majority party rule during the 1950s. Unfortunately for the RPP, however, it was the newly formed DP that finished first in the elections of 1950, 1954, and 1957 and enjoyed disproportionately large parliamentary majorities, while the electoral system vastly reduced the former's seats in the legislature.

Largely in response to the criticisms directed at the plurality system—led by the RPP, which remained in opposition throughout the 1950s—the electoral system was changed to

proportional representation (PR) in the aftermath of the 1960 military coup. The adoption of the PR system in 1961 improved minor parties' chances of parliamentary representation. On the other hand, it also contributed to the intensification of factionalism in party organizations. Both of the major parties experienced factional splits from their ranks, which resulted in the formation of new parties in the 1960s. The switch from a plurality to a PR electoral system also increased the degree of parliamentary fractionalization, necessitating the formation of coalition governments for the first time in contemporary Turkish politics.

Since 1961, Turkey has used the PR system with several variations of the d'Hondt formula for the translation of votes into seats. The parties finishing first and second in the elections have generally received a share of the seats that is larger than their share of the votes, while the smaller parties have gained fewer seats in proportion to the percentage of their electoral support. One of the most criticized and controversial aspects of Turkey's electoral law concerns the inclusion of a 10 percent national threshold requirement that parties must pass to qualify for seats. This electoral threshold, which is one of the highest among democratic countries, has been criticized for undermining the fairness of political representation. Adopted following the 1980 coup as part of the military's institutional engineering project, its main purpose appeared to be twofold: to facilitate the formation of stable, majority party governments, and to prevent the entry of the smaller parties into parliament, especially those representing religious, sectarian, and ethnic interests. The high electoral threshold has had divergent effects on parties and political competition. In the 1980s the degree of fragmentation in the party system was limited and Turkey had majority party governments, but during the 1990s the threshold failed to prevent the rise of fragmentation and the entry of five or six parties into the parliament. In the 2002 elections the threshold effectively excluded several major parties of the preceding decade from the parliament (thereby causing 45 percent of the votes to be wasted) while it provided the two parties that finished first and second with large bonuses in terms of seats. The impact of the high electoral threshold in 2002 appears to have influenced voting behavior in the 2007 elections: a sizeable portion of the voters abandoned smaller parties in favor of the larger ones, and some also engaged in tactical voting³ as a result of "a more realistic appreciation of the effects of the electoral system" (Hale, 2008: 244). Turkey's high threshold has also been responsible for the efforts of parties to form preelection coalitions (such as the one between two center-left parties in 2007) and for the nomination of independent candidates by Kurdish nationalists (who generally receive about 6 percent of the votes). Since there are no national thresholds for independents (they have to receive enough votes in their electoral districts to qualify for seats under the d'Hondt largest average formula), the Kurdish bloc has succeeded in bypassing the high threshold and winning 24 and 36 seats as independents in the 2007 and 2011 elections, respectively.

The party system

Since its emergence more than six decades ago, the Turkish party system has experienced several major transformations with respect to its format (or the number of relevant parties), its mechanics (or degree of polarization between parties), and its type of government (majority-party or coalition).⁴ During the 1950s Turkey had a two-party system and majority party governments, and both major parties, the DP and the RPP, were center-oriented with only limited ideological distance between them. After 1961 the number of parties gaining parliamentary seats increased, governments were formed through coalitions (with the exception of the period from 1965 to 1971), and there was a steady increase of left-right ideological polarization in party politics. Following a period of instability resulting from the closure of the DP after the 1960 coup, the

Justice Party (JP) succeeded in establishing itself as the DP's heir in the party system. The 1970s witnessed growing ideological battles between the center-right JP and the center-left RPP. Minor parties on the extremes, such as the far-right Nationalist Action Party (NAP) and the Marxist Turkish Labor Party (TLP) on the far left, contributed to the left-right polarization. The entry of a pro-Islamist party, the National Salvation Party (NSP), into the parliament in 1973 brought yet another source of polarization, based on the issue of religion, into the party system.

The banning of all pre-1980 political parties after the 1980 coup administered a major shock to the party system. Two key changes occurred in party politics during the 1980s. First was the emergence of a newly formed center-right party, the Motherland Party (MP), as the dominant party from 1983 to 1991. The MP won the 1983 and 1987 elections and formed single-party governments during this period. The second change was the rise of fragmentation within the center-right and center-left blocs. On the center-right, the banning of the principal force of the pre-1980 period, the JP, led to the emergence of the MP and the True Path Party (TPP) as the main contenders for the center-right votes. On the center-left, two new parties, the Democratic Left Party (DLP) and the Social Democratic Populist Party (SDPP), competed with each other to replace another major party of the pre-coup period, the RPP. (The RPP remerged under its original name in 1992, and the SDPP merged with it in 1995.)

Following the 1991 elections, fragmentation and polarization returned to the party system in full force, along with coalition governments. None of the three elections in 1991, 1995, nor 1999 resulted in the formation of majority party governments. Instead, Turkey was governed by a series of successive coalitions in which, in addition to the two center-right (MP and TPP) and the two center-left (RPP and DLP) parties, the far-right NAP and the pro-Islamist Welfare Party (WP) also participated. In addition to being fragmented, the Turkish party system was also highly polarized during the 1990s. Unlike two decades earlier, when party politics was engulfed in the ideological battles between the left and the right, the polarization after 1991 stemmed largely from the growing polarization in Turkish society and politics over the issue of religion. The pro-Islamist WP's rising electoral support generated a strong backlash from the pro-secular forces, whose principal representative in the party system was the staunchly secularist RPP (Sayan, 2007).

Beginning with the 2002 elections, the party system underwent another major transformation. This time, rather than the political engineering strategies of the military regimes, the main source of change was the shifting electoral preferences of the voters. In 2002 a newly formed party, the Justice and Development Party (JDP), which has deep roots in Turkey's Islamist movement, emerged victorious at the polls, while the RPP finished second. None of the other parties managed to clear the 10 percent electoral threshold and enter the parliament. The mechanical effects of the PR electoral system provided the JDP, and to a lesser degree the RPP, with a disproportionately large number of seats in comparison to their actual share of the votes. The JDP went on to win the 2007 and 2011 elections, each time increasing its popular support, something which had never happened before in Turkey's history of electoral competition (see [Table 18.1](#)). As a result of its successes at the ballot box, the JDP has been the governing party since 2002, with the opposition parties excluded from power. Consequently, the Turkish party system has acquired the basic properties of a predominant party system. As described by Sartori (1976), this is a system in which the same party wins a majority of the seats in the parliament in three or more successive elections and governs alone. The fact that the JDP also controls the presidency of the Republic as well as many municipal and local elective offices throughout the country makes its dominant role in Turkish politics all the more pronounced. Another major change since 2002 concerns the virtual disappearance of some of the parties, such as the TPP,

MP, and DLP, which all figured prominently in the coalition politics of the 1990s. Their demise has reduced the number of relevant parties and the degree of fragmentation in the party system

Since 2007, four parties—the pro-Islamist JDP, the center-left RPP, the far-right NAP, and the Kurdish bloc—have been represented in the parliament. The JDP has towered above its rivals in terms of electoral support and parliamentary strength (see Table 18.1). The RPP has finished a distant second in the three elections since 2002. Nevertheless, it remains the other major actor in the party system. After failing to pass the threshold in 2002, the NAP succeeded in gaining parliamentary representation in the 2007 and 2011 elections. However, its popular support has remained much more limited than that of the JDP and RPP. Although the Kurdish nationalists have become the dominant electoral force in several predominantly Kurdish eastern and southeastern provinces, their parliamentary strength also remains limited. Consequently, if the criterion of the number of relevant parties—rather than that of extended stay in power—is used, the Turkish party system in the post-2002 era can be classified as a two and a half-party system.

It is also worth noting that there has been a trend toward stabilization of the party system since 2002. During the 1990s the party system was beset by protracted instability due to high rates of electoral volatility, extensive party switching among the parliamentarians, drastic changes in the popular support of parties between two elections, and the rise and fall of successive coalition governments. In contrast, the post-2002 party system has displayed greater stability: the pattern of party competition has become more regularized in the absence of wide swings in electoral preferences, the phenomenon of party switching in the parliament has virtually disappeared, and there have been highly durable majority party governments.

Table 18.1 Elections in Turkey since 1991

Party	1991		1995		1999		2002		2007		2011	
	% of votes	Seats	% of votes	Seats	% of votes	Seats	% of votes	Seats	% of votes	Seats	% of votes	Seats
JDP	-	-	-	-	-	-	34.43	365	46.47	341	49.95	326
RPP	-	-	10.71	49	-	-	19.41	177	20.84	112	25.94	135
NAP	-	-	-	-	17.98	129	-	-	14.26	71	12.98	53
SDPP	20.75	88	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
DLP	10.75	7	14.64	76	22.19	136	-	-	-	-	-	-
MP	24.01	115	19.65	132	13.22	86	-	-	-	-	-	-
TPP	27.03	178	19.18	135	12.01	85	-	-	-	-	-	-
WP	16.88	62	21.38	158	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
VP	-	-	-	-	15.41	111	-	-	-	-	-	-
FP	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.49	-	2.34	-	1.25	-
Others	0.58	-	14.44	-	19.19	-	43.67	-	16.09	-	9.88	-
Independent	0.13	-	0.48	-	0.87	3	0.96	8	5.19	26	6.58	36
All	100	450	100	550	100	550	100	550	100	550	100	550

Source: Data compiled from Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu Başkanlığı, 2008; and Tuncer, 2011.

Note: Party composition of governments: 1991–95 coalition of TPP and SDPP; 1995–96 coalition of TPP and RPP; 1996–97 coalition of RP and TPP; 1997–99 coalition of MP, DLP and DTP; January–May 1999 minority party government of DLP; 1999–2002 coalition of DLP, NAP and MP; 2002– majority party government of JDP.

Party organization

The genesis of modern party organizations in Turkey in the early twentieth century reflected the basic features of cadre rather than mass parties. Duverger (1954) and others have identified cadre-type parties as those that are formed by rival elites in the parliament and by cliques of notables in local communities. The cadre party engages in only intermittent activity between elections and does not place great emphasis on the recruitment of members. Mass parties, on the other hand, are distinguished by their extraparliamentary origins, by their efforts to recruit large numbers of regular dues-paying members, and by the importance they attach to party-related activities throughout the year (Kirchheimer, 1966). The first political parties in Turkey were organized along the lines of the cadre party model. Over the years there have been changes in parties' organization, most notably with respect to their expansion throughout the country. During the course of more than six decades of electoral politics, major parties have received broad popular support from the masses. Largely for this reason, parties in Turkey are often referred to in the media as mass parties (*kitle partileri*). However, one of the major requirements of the mass party model—the presence of a dues-paying membership—has been missing from Turkish parties. None of the major parties have made an effort to maintain regular membership records or demand regular monthly dues from their members. Parties commonly claim that they have a large membership base, but in the absence of well-kept records, it is not possible to verify these claims (Sayan, 1976).

Political parties in Turkey have faced a number of problems in their efforts to establish strong and durable roots in society. Following the transition to democracy, the two major parties, the DP and RPP, formed local organizations in small towns and villages throughout most of Turkey. However, the banning of the DP following the 1960 military coup was a serious blow to the development of party organization. More importantly, the 1965 Political Parties Law prohibited parties from establishing local units below the level of the sub-province (*ilçe*). This meant, in effect, that parties could no longer have formal organizational linkages with nearly 40,000 villages and millions of voters. The prohibition of party units in the villages reflected the view, shared by the military officers and some civilian politicians, that party activities at the grassroots level during the 1950s had exacerbated social and political conflicts among the villagers, thus undermining national unity and solidarity. The ban on all existing parties in the aftermath of the 1980 military intervention had even more drastic effects on party organizations: it undermined continuity in organizational life, weakened the ties between parties and voters, and led to a serious decline in party identification. The 1982 constitution, which was prepared under the aegis of the military, similarly weakened party organizations by prohibiting parties from forming youth and women's branches, and barring students, university faculty, and government civil servants from party membership. This constitutional provision was part of the military regime's project to depoliticize Turkish society, following the high degree of left-right ideological polarization experienced during the 1970s. Although some of these restrictions were removed through constitutional amendments during the 1990s, they nevertheless contributed to the problems of organizational development that parties faced a decade earlier. The main exception to the weakness of party organization in Turkey has been the pro-Islamist parties. The WP during the 1990s, and the JDP since 2001, have succeeded in establishing strong organizational networks staffed by large numbers of party workers. The pro-Islamist parties have also enjoyed considerably more financial resources than their major competitors. The organizational strength of the WP and the JDP, especially among the urban poor, has played an important role in their success in both national and local elections (Eligür, 2010).

The formal structures of party organizations in Turkey are quite similar. In terms of a functional classification, they include executive committees at the national party headquarters, party groups in the parliament, and disciplinary bodies. With respect to territorial structures, party organizations extend from the national headquarters in Ankara to the province and sub-province levels. The similarities in party organizations stem from the provisions included in the Political Parties Law, which require all parties to follow the same organizational format (Sayarı, 1976). However, informal organizational practices often deviate from these formal requirements with respect to such important issues as the requirements for membership, the holding of election primaries, and transparency in financial contributions to the parties.

A notable feature of party organization in Turkey concerns the relative absence of internal party democracy and the dominant role of the party leaders. Party leaders have traditionally exercised excessive control over the decision-making process. They have also managed to stay in the top positions of their parties for very long periods. For example, Süleyman Demirel served as the leader of first the JP and then the TPP for nearly 20 years, Bülent Ecevit remained the leader of the RPP and DLP for 25 years, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has occupied the top leadership position of the JDP since 2001. In Turkish politics, adherence to the general practice of European democracies whereby a leader whose party performs poorly in the elections promptly resigns has been the exception rather than the rule. Party leaders' dominant roles and long tenures stem from two main sources. First, candidate selection for the parliament is centralized, and party leaders have the final say about who will be nominated and what their rank will be on the party lists in the elections. Second, party leaders have extensive formal power and authority (such as the legal means to abolish local units that oppose their decisions). The role of the party leaders and the personalization of party leadership have been further enhanced in more recent years by the growing importance of television coverage of politics and elections, which tends to overemphasize the party leaders at the expense of lesser-ranking party officials.

Conclusion

In 1965 one of the most perceptive analysts writing about Turkey declared that “Turkish politics is party politics” (Frey, 1965: 301). This observation is as valid today as it was over four decades ago. Although other actors, most notably the military, have also played influential roles in politics, parties have remained the major actors in Turkish political life. As has been outlined in this study, the Turkish party system has undergone several major changes since its emergence in the immediate aftermath of World War II with respect to the number of relevant parties, patterns of government formation, and the dynamics of interparty relations. There have been notable changes in the individual parties as well. Some key players in party politics have disappeared from the political scene, new ones have gained prominence and success in electoral politics, and parties have adopted new strategies and programs. However, various other aspects of party politics have not undergone equally significant changes. With some notable exceptions, party organizations have continued to be weak, while party leaders still tend to enjoy long tenures and a monopolization of power within the party structures.

Notes

- 1 For analyses of Turkish parties and party politics, see Tunaya (1952); Karpaz (1959); Frey (1965); Heper and Landau (1991); Rubin and Heper (2002); Sayarı and Esmer (2002); Heper and Sayarı (2002); Kalaycıoğlu and Çarkoğlu (2007); Hale and Özbudun (2010); Eligür (2010).

- 2 The first election following the permission to establish opposition parties was held in 1946. It was marked by large-scale rigging of the electoral results by the government. The elections held four years later were conducted according to democratic norms and practices.
- 3 Tactical or strategic voting takes place when voters support a party other than their own to prevent “wasting” their votes and/or to support another party which may have a better chance of winning the election than their own party.
- 4 On developments in the party system and their political consequences, see Çarkoğlu (1998); Kalaycıoğlu (1994); Özbudun (1981); Akgün (2001); Turan (1988); Sayarı (2002, 2007).

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