

# The ‘Turkish-Type’ Presidential System: an Imperial Civilisational Restoration?

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## Abstract

This article analyses the ideological background on which the Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) policy rested for the adoption of the presidential system in Turkey. It examines the presidential system as an AKP claim aiming at the resolution of Turkey’s ‘basic historical contradiction’ through the effort to restore the Ottoman imperial legacy. In the same context, the analysis extends to the ideological content of ‘New Turkey’, which focuses on the adoption of a ‘Turkish-type’ presidential system. At this level the importance of the identification of a powerful state with the centralisation of executive power is emphasised as a natural result of the restoration of the Ottoman imperial legacy. Finally, the article presents specific problematic aspects arising from the social and ideological polarisation accompanying the transition of Turkey to the presidential system.

## Keywords

imperial restoration – conservatism – presidential system – Ottomanism – civilisational normalisation – Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

With the June 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections, the cycle of Turkey’s transition to the presidential system was completed. In this way, these elections mark a key turning point in the history of the country. The adoption of the presidential system took place in circumstances of social and political polarisation as well as an escalating economic crisis. At the same time, the timing was characterised by the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies among

many governments, in Turkey and internationally. It is true that the change of political system in Turkey raised significant political, social and ideological issues. However, this article chooses to focus on an attempt to comprehend the ideological background against which the government of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has in recent years aimed to legitimise and promote the adoption of the presidential system.

First, this article examines the basic aspects of the perceptions of the Islamic movement and the Turkish centre-right in general in relation to the westernisation process and the dominance of Kemalism. In this context, it underlines the historical reading of the Islamic movement in relation to the fundamental contradiction of Turkey, in its view, as a Muslim nation on which Western civilisation has been imposed, and its repercussions on society and the political system. According to the Turkish Islamic movement and AKP in particular, the predominance of a tutelary regime, as well as the operation of a parliamentary system that reproduced the basis for tutelage, formed the basic parameters for the alienation of the state from the nation and were, therefore, problems that needed to be overcome. Second, this article analyses one of the basic formulas for overcoming the fundamental contradiction of Turkey, which according to AKP should be a political programme for the restoration of the Ottoman-Islamic heritage and for the reform of the structures of power in a way that would express the values of the 'genuine nation'. In the epicentre of this programme lie conservative restoration and a sense of regaining of power by the representatives of the 'genuine nation'. The realisation of this goal has appeared as the way to re-strengthen the state through the adoption of a constitution and a political order that would secure and make visible Turkey's 'return' to its imperial-civilisational basin.

The third part of the article analyses how the presidential system was promoted as a practical expression of establishing the 'New Turkey'. Given the ideological background of the Islamic movement in general, and AKP in particular, it is clearly obvious that the adoption of the presidential system was seen as a 'natural development' towards the normalisation of the country as, among other things, the new political system was presented as legitimised by imperial historical traditions and the 'genes' of Turkish society. The presidential system was promoted as a basic tool for the accomplishment of the historical goal of 'reunification of the state with its nation' through the 'customisation' of authority to the true values of society. Finally, the article records certain specific problematic aspects that the concept of the 'Turkish-type' presidential system reproduces. The tendency to cut off the presidential system from widely accepted universal norms and standards has created the preconditions for the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies and the weakening of the

separation of powers. At the same time, AKP's intense emphasis on the desired 'native and national' characteristics of the new power structures has reproduced polarisation around ideological and cultural axes. Therefore, the defining of 'native and national' criteria by the dominant power and the adoption of the presidential system in this context have created the preconditions for new destabilisation centres because of the ideological embodiment of a part of society and the exclusion of another.

### **Turkey's 'Fundamental Contradiction': Disintegration of the Empire and Kemalism as an Alien Body**

Every political thought and political regime should address the individual and be based on a specific time and space. The political regime that does not address the individual and ignores the necessities of time and space cannot be permanent. Moving towards the hundredth anniversary of our Republic, the New Turkey will be the creation of reorganisation that through regeneration and continuity comprehensively addresses the individual, [as well as] time and space.<sup>1</sup>

This is an extract from 'New Turkey Contract 2023' (*Yeni Türkiye Sözleşmesi 2023*), the programme published by AKP before the June 2015 general elections. This programme was important in terms of AKP's demand for adoption of the presidential system. However, from this particular extract one can decode some important references concerning the ideological framework through which AKP, the Islamic movement in Turkey, and also a large part of the Turkish centre-right promoted, over time, the need to adopt the presidential system. More specifically, the dialectical relationship between a historical contradiction, a point of rupture and a dynamic restoration can be observed. Historical contradiction is described in the tension that results if a political regime ignores the 'necessities of the individual, time and space'. The point of rupture is described in the establishment of a New Turkey, while restoration refers to 'reorganisation through reform and continuity'. To one degree or another, the above relationship was historically expressed by almost all ideological components of the Turkish centre-right, but particularly by Turkish Islamism.

A characteristic but not unique example is the theoretical endeavour of former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. He argued that the basic contradiction

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<sup>1</sup> AK Parti, *Yeni Türkiye Sözleşmesi 2023* (Istanbul, 2015), articles 1–2.

experienced by Turkey is the problematic adaptation of the political culture of a society that was in the centre of a particular civilisation (*medeniyet*) to a political system built by an elite imposing an alien civilisation on it. This contradiction is, according to Davutoğlu, one of Turkey's most important distinct characteristics.<sup>2</sup> The most important point that arises from this argument is what determines the nature of Turkish society as part of Ottoman-Islamic civilisation, the civilisation, that is, which the AKP leadership defines as 'our civilisation'.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the contradiction is that with the establishment of the Republic and the dominance of Kemalism the aforementioned historicity was rejected and the Kemalist elite aimed at immersing society in Western civilisation.<sup>4</sup>

This basic contradiction is considered problematic in the historical development of Turkey because of two important aspects. The first relates to the procedure of westernisation. It should be noted that this procedure is viewed critically by a large section of the Turkish right (nationalism, Islamism, conservatism)<sup>5</sup> as one that cut off society from 'its roots and traditions'.<sup>6</sup> In general, the 200-year history of westernisation of the country, which began during the late period of the Ottoman Empire, is presented as an 'anomaly' and as a diversion from its authentic historical legacy.<sup>7</sup> The process of westernisation is presented as a period of 'forced' acceptance of western superiority, but also as a historic defeat that put an end to the Ottoman golden era, evoking feelings of inferiority.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, however, the feeling of historic defeat created the framework for the revival of the political programme of 'revenge' through the restoration of Turkey's imperial legacy, as the only way for the strengthening of the state.<sup>9</sup> For Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, westernisation was more or less a

<sup>2</sup> Davutoğlu, Ahmet, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (İstanbul: Küre Yayıncılık, 2001), p. 83.

<sup>3</sup> Menderes, Çınar, "Turkey's 'Western' or 'Muslim' identity and the AKP's civilizational discourse", *Turkish Studies*, 19 (2018), 176–97.

<sup>4</sup> Yaşı, Fatih, *AKP, Cemaat, Sünni-Ulus: Yeni Türkiye Üzerine Tezler* (İstanbul: Yordam Kitap, 2014), p. 147.

<sup>5</sup> Bora, Tanıl, *Türk Sağının Üç Hali: Milliyetçilik, Muhafazakârlık, İslamcılık* (İstanbul: Birikim Yayıncılık, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Taşkin, Yüksel, *Milliyetçi Muhafazakâr Entelijansıya: Anti-Komünizmden Küreselleşme Karşılığında* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayıncılık, 2007), p. 135.

<sup>7</sup> Arat-Koç, Sedef, "Culturalizing politics, hyper-politicizing 'culture': 'White' vs 'Black Turks' and the making of authoritarian populism in Turkey", *Dialectical Anthropology*, 42 (2018), 391–408.

<sup>8</sup> Yılmaz, İhsan, *Kemalizm'den Erdoğanizm'e: Türkiye'de Din, Devlet ve Makbul Vatandaş* (İstanbul: Ufuk Yayıncılık, 2015), pp. 55–57.

<sup>9</sup> Tokdoğan, Nagehan, *Yeni Osmanlıcılık: Hınc, Nostalji, Narsisizm* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayıncılık, 2018), p. 155.

stain and disorientated the nation in time and space.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, detecting the historical disorientation caused by the westernisation process, Necmettin Erbakan stressed: 'We are not a random nation of the world. We should regain our place in history'.<sup>11</sup>

The critical approach to the westernisation process and its treatment as mimicking the West or forcing the 'nation to follow foreign horizons'<sup>12</sup> with negative results for the historical development of Turkey is characteristic of almost the entire spectrum of the Turkish right. For example, Intellectuals' Hearth (*Aydınlar Ocağı*)<sup>13</sup> and its ideological endeavours were important in the widening of the influence of the critical approach to westernisation. Among the basic positions of İbrahim Kefesoğlu, protagonist of this organisation, was that the Turkish-Islamic cultural heritage resulted in the establishment of two great empires, the Seljuk and the Ottoman, but mimicking of the West by eighteenth-century intellectuals finally brought about the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. According to the same author, the consequences of this mimicking went as far as bringing about instability in the 1970s resulting in the loss of balance between family, mosque and army.<sup>14</sup> As a matter of fact, Western culture and the process of westernisation were seen as 'the mother of all evils' for Turkey, through which local culture and the nature and identity of society were threatened with total destruction.<sup>15</sup> Eminent Islamist intellectual Mustafa Özel stressed that Turkey could not retain its unity through an ideology imported from the West, but only through a real connection with Islam 'which is the basic source of our perception of the world'.<sup>16</sup>

The second aspect of the problematic situation created by the historic contradiction, according to the Islamists, was that the authoritarian 'transfer' of Turkey related to a completely alien and ontologically different civilisational

<sup>10</sup> Duran, Burhanettin, "Cumhuriyet Dönemi İslamcılığı: İdeolojik Konumları, Dönüşümü ve Evleri", in *Modern Türkiye'de Siyasi Düşünce: İslamcılık*, vol. 6, Yasin Aktay (ed.) (İstanbul: İletişim Yayıncıları, 2004), pp. 129–56.

<sup>11</sup> "Erbakan: Sultan Hamit'in Zihniyetini Korusaydık En İyi Tankları Yapardık", *Milliyet* (23 March 1975).

<sup>12</sup> Bora, Tanıl, *Cereyanlar: Türkiye'de Siyasi İdeolojiler* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayıncıları, 2017), pp. 406–7.

<sup>13</sup> Bora, Tanıl, and Kemal Can, *Devlet, Ocak, Dergâh: 12 Eylül'den 1990'lara Ülkücü Hareket* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayıncıları, 2000), p. 170.

<sup>14</sup> Eligür, Banu, *The Mobilization of Political Islam in Turkey* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 97.

<sup>15</sup> Karasipahi, Sena, *Muslims in Modern Turkey: Kemalism, Modernism and the Revolt of the Islamic Intellectuals* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), p. 58.

<sup>16</sup> Özel, Mustafa, "Yirmibirinci Yüzyıla Girerken Dünya Sistemi ve Türkiye", *Çerçeve*, 17 (1996), 54–61.

system.<sup>17</sup> In this context the West is not considered in geographic terms, but as a unitary monolithically defined cultural entity, identified at times with Christianity, at times with secularism and at times with capitalism,<sup>18</sup> but always with certain attitudes, values and elements<sup>19</sup> incompatible with the Ottoman-Islamic civilisation. In fact, the existence of these very unbridgeable differences between the two worlds, the Islamic and the Western, is what reveals the existence of two completely different entities. On one side stands *Homo Islamicus*, who possesses special characteristics in relation to understanding God, man and nature. These particular characteristics stand as the alternative to *Homo occidentalis*,<sup>20</sup> the entity on the other side. According to the same way of thinking, in the framework of the two different worlds, the different self-consciousnesses of the individual appear, which form the substance of the identity of the people, i.e. members of a particular civilisation.<sup>21</sup> This self-consciousness (a difference in Islamic civilisation) is the most comprehensive proof of the ontological difference between the two worlds.<sup>22</sup>

Even if the clash between the two ontologically different civilisations is not considered a causal development, nonetheless according to a great part of the Turkish Islamic intelligentsia, the Islamic self-consciousness of the civilisation to which the country belongs cannot adapt to the crisis created by the access of society to 'another civilisation'. Since, on the basis of the aforementioned, the Turkish political body is identified with the Ottoman-Islamic past and Ottoman geography,<sup>23</sup> Kemalism is not accepted as a natural part of the Turkish historical experience. On the contrary, Kemalism is understood in the sense of a 'diversion' or a 'parenthesis' in the development of Turkish history and politics, as an attempt for a complete civilisational transformation through the replacement of native characteristics with Western standards and views.<sup>24</sup> Among the negative effects created by the imposition of this 'alien body' on Turkish history is a 'schizophrenic situation'<sup>25</sup> at the epicentre of which lies the alienation of politics from its genuine history and geography.

17 Davutoğlu, Ahmet, *Civilizational Transformations and the Muslim World* (Kuala Lumpur: Mahir Publications, 1994), pp. 65–66.

18 Karasipahi, *Muslims in Modern Turkey*, p. 67.

19 Özeli, İsmet, *Üç Mesele: Teknik – Medeniyet – Yabancılılaşma* (İstanbul: Şule Yayımları, 1998), p. 149.

20 Davutoğlu, *Civilizational Transformations*, pp. 65–66.

21 Davutoğlu, Ahmet, "Medeniyetlerin Ben-idraki", *Divan*, 1 (1997), 1–53.

22 Adak, Sevgi, and Ömer Turan, "Restorasyon Hareketinin Başkanı: Ahmet Davutoğlu", *Birikim*, 306 (2014), 33–41.

23 Bora, Tanıl, "Esat Arslan İle İslamcılık Üzerine Söylesi: 'Derinlerden Gelen 'Aaah!'ı Pozitif bir Projeye Çeviremezsek...'", *Birikim*, 355 (2018), 62–83.

24 Karasipahi, *Muslims in Modern Turkey*, pp. 96–97.

25 Bora, "Esat Arslan İle İslamlıkh", p. 70.

The process of westernisation becomes in this way a 'hundred-year parenthesis', which has however contributed to the marginalisation of the identity of the genuine Turkish civilisation.<sup>26</sup> As a result of the authoritarian imposition of a vertical system of elitist values such as Kemalism,<sup>27</sup> Turkishness was cut off from Islam, stripped of the truth and weakened since it moved away from its imperial achievements<sup>28</sup> and from its Islamic imperial tradition. In this way, for Kisakürek, the establishment of republican Turkey was the monumental moment in the alienation of the Turkish people from their Ottoman past and from their historical and moral roots.<sup>29</sup> At the same level of historical understanding, many Islamists consider the Kemalist state as the result of defeat and see its establishment as carrying the characteristics of the pressure exercised by the victors of the First World War, in conflict with the values, history and religion of the people.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, that particular period marks for them, too, the marginalisation and abolition of the memory of the Ottoman imperial legacy. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has characteristically stressed that "[t]his nation has known unscrupulous officials who sold millions of documents from the Ottoman archives for scrap paper for a few pennies ... Unfortunately, so many works, documents and events that will remind our nation of its glorious past were deliberately marginalised".<sup>31</sup>

In the same spirit, Cengiz Aydoğdu, MP of AKP, used Edmund Burke's critique of the French Revolution, which the British conservative theorist considered the 'destruction of the sense of dignity in France'. Through Burke, Aydoğdu indirectly underlined that Kemalist westernisation questioned the native 'imperial' dignity of Turkey.<sup>32</sup> AKP, therefore, claims to undertake a 'historic mission' of restoration of the country's lost dignity against the West and the westernisation process, something to be achieved by the restoration of the 'Ottoman imperial self-confidence and pride'. As Erdoğan has stated, '[w]e have and continue to struggle to infuse self-confidence into the nation. We struggle to infuse courage into the nation'.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Adak and Turan, "Restorasyon Hareketinin", p. 41.

<sup>27</sup> Bora, "Esat Arslan ile İslamcılık", p. 70.

<sup>28</sup> Yıldız, Ersin, "AKP Devletinin İdeolojik Mekanizmasına Kavramsal bir Bakış", *Birikim*, 336 (2017), 51–70.

<sup>29</sup> Duran, "Cumhuriyet Dönemi İslamcılık", p. 133.

<sup>30</sup> Abak, Şaban, "Türkiye Yeniden Kurulurken", *Yeni Şafak* (6 December 2012).

<sup>31</sup> "Hafıza 15 Temmuz Müzesi Açıılış Töreninde Yapıtları Konuşma" (15 July 2019), <https://tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/107088/hafiza-15-temmuz-muzesi-acilis-toreninde-yaptiklari-konusma>.

<sup>32</sup> TBMM, *Anayasa Komisyonu Tutanak Dergisi. 4'üncü Toplantı* (23 December 2016), p. 50.

<sup>33</sup> Tokdoğan, *Yeni Osmanlıcılık*, p. 109.

Turkey's fundamental contradiction, according to the Islamist intelligentsia, exercises a holistic influence on society and the political system because the authoritarian inclusion of the country in an alien civilisational system also meant the imposition of an alien rather than a native culture, constitution and political system. It is characteristic that the ideological positions of the Islamic National Outlook Movement (*Millî Görüş Hareketi*) included the strong statement that the Turkish state had been under 'the occupation of foreign powers'—that is, the western-type secular elite. This situation finally reproduced alienation of the 'genuine nation' from its own state.<sup>34</sup> This rationale is extended in such a way as to critically assess issues that concern the constitution and the system of government in Turkey. In particular, the constitutions adopted after 1921 are considered texts of autocratic enforcement that drastically marginalised, overlooked and underestimated not only the local and native peculiarities and culture, but also religious faith.<sup>35</sup> As Erdoğan himself has remarked, '[t]o this day the country has been ruled according to imported constitutions instead of native ones. We have been ruled by imported products and therefore imported rationales have been dominant. We should now return to what is native and national'.<sup>36</sup>

The necessity for a 'return to the native and national' basically results from the long-term non-adaptation of society to a 'foreign' constitution and government system like parliamentarism. Foreign constitutions resulted in the violation of national will,<sup>37</sup> that is the will of the genuine nation, a nation resulting from Eastern, not Western history. As Muhammet Emin Akbaşoğlu, MP of AKP, stated, the constitutions that resulted from the rise to power of the Committee of Union and Progress (*İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti*), and especially the 1908 Constitution, represent the epoch of 'treacherous attempts' at the shrinking of the Ottoman Empire and its final breakup.<sup>38</sup> According to other AKP members, this particular period was also marked by the reproduction of problems because the parliamentary system was alien to the local peculiarities of Turkey and could not function on the basis of Turkish traditions and culture.<sup>39</sup>

34 Köseoglu, Talha, "Islamists and the state: changing discourses on the state, civil society and democracy in Turkey", *Turkish Studies*, 20 (2018), 323–50.

35 "8 Maddede Neden Başkanlık Sistemi?", *Sabah* (1 February 2016).

36 "T.C Cumhurbaşkanlığı: Yeni Anaya Hep Birlikte Temali Programda Yaptıkları Konuşma" (28 January 2016), <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/38673/yeni-anayasa-icin-hep-birlikte-temali-programda-yaptıkları-konusma>.

37 Kuzu, Burhan, "Türkiye İçin Başkanlık Sistemi 1", *Liberal Düşünce Dergisi*, 2 (1996), 13–43.

38 TBMM, *Anayasa Komisyonu Tutanak Dergisi. 3'üncü Toplantı* (22 December 2016), pp. 6–8.

39 Tozkoparan, Nursel, "AK Parti Başkanlık Sistemini 2001'de Açıklamıştı", *Haber 7* (28 November 2012).

The wider Islamic movement (as well as AKP from a point onwards) promoted the fundamental political position that the Kemalist republican state itself, and its power structures and constitutions, marginalised the Islamic Ottoman past and at the same time presented themselves as the outcomes of 'salvation from the Ottomans'.<sup>40</sup> In this way the whole experience of the state-building procedure in contemporary Turkey constitutes an example of creating power structures that reproduced a tutelary regime and prevented the interaction between state and nation<sup>41</sup>—a state and a nation that would originate from the East and Islam. In this particular framework, the main critique articulated against Kemalist republicanism focuses on the production of a 'regime question' because state power was alienated from the nation.<sup>42</sup> In its turn the alienation of elitist authority from the nation enabled the tutelary structures to obstruct the 'unity between state and nation'. Therefore, the deep rifts created by the marginalisation of society's Islamic Ottoman past were reflected on the political system in a way that a culturally alien and numerically small elite found itself dominating the 'authentic nation'.<sup>43</sup>

The absence of the nation from the creation of the constitutions was a conscious attempt by the bureaucratic elite to retain control of power, but also to prevent the reflection of the traditional and religious values of the nation in the state structures.<sup>44</sup> In fact, according to AKP, this has been a perennial phenomenon. As stressed by Ahmet İyimaya, MP of AKP, 'the constitution problem has always been present in Turkey's history and unfortunately the architect of the constitutions put into effect, even during the multi-party period, was not the nation...'.<sup>45</sup> The basic tool of reproduction of the power monopoly by the bureaucratic elite was the very parliamentary system imposed on the country. 'Tutelary parliamentarism', as Nebi Miş and Mehmet Zahid Sobacı call it,<sup>46</sup> was a mechanism reproducing the power of the elite that played a decisive role in the establishment of the republican state and acquired privileges. Through

40 TBMM, *Anayasa Komisyonu Tutanak Dergisi*. 4'üncü Toplantı, p. 50.

41 Aslan, Ali, "Türkiye için Başkanlık Sistemi: Demokratikleşme, İstikrar, Kurumsallaşma", *SETA Analiz*, no. 122 (2015), p. 11.

42 Açıç, Mehmet, "Genelkurmay Savunma Bakanlığı'na Bağlandı, Şimdi Ne Olacak?", *Yeni Şafak* (16 July 2018).

43 Aslan, Ali, "24 Haziran Seçimlerinin Siyasi Anlamı: Yerli-Milli Siyaset ve Cumhurbaşkanlığı Hükümet Sistemi", *SETA Analiz*, no. 240 (2018), pp. 12–13.

44 Köseoğlu, "Islamists and the state", pp. 333–34.

45 TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, 54'üncü Birleşim, 10 January 2017, p. 473.

46 Miş, Nebi, and Mehmet Zahid Sobacı, "AK Parti ve Cumhurbaşkanlığı Hükümet Sistemi", in *AK Parti'nin 15 Yılı: Siyaset*, Nebi Miş and Ali Aslan (eds) (Istanbul: SETA Yayınları, 2018), pp. 129–58.

this particular mechanism the bureaucratic elite did not allow for the emergence of opposition to the Republican People's Party (CHP) with the excuse that it would constitute a danger to the secular state. At the same time, this structure created the preconditions for the exclusion of the conservative strata of the population from power or their control in case of strengthened representation at the National Assembly.<sup>47</sup> As Mücahit Bilici underlined, the President of Turkey was in reality 'a president without people and the people remained without president'.<sup>48</sup> In fact, the custodial orientation of the Turkish constitutions 'took the authority of the state and offered it to the bureaucratic institutions', a characteristic which, according to AKP, contributed to the alienation of the people from the state, the law and the judicial system, while it also weakened the democratic culture.<sup>49</sup>

According to political Islam in Turkey, a core aspect of the practical implementation of the tutelary regime and the exclusion of the nation from power was the military coups and the constitutions which resulted from them.<sup>50</sup> In one of his speeches Erdogan underlined: 'The texts of the constitutions are social contracts. Our constitutions, however, were prepared as orders by military coups'.<sup>51</sup> AKP's critique focused on that the constitutions created after every military coup strengthened 'non-confidence towards the national will',<sup>52</sup> which was central to the custodial regime philosophy. A characteristic example is the 1960 coup, aimed against the Democratic Party's attempt to open up the state to the nation—a prospect which, according to AKP circles, would have created the preconditions for 'authentic power of the nation' (*otantik iktidar*).<sup>53</sup> These characteristics of tutelary parliamentarianism also constituted its historic pathology,<sup>54</sup> since it was structured in such a way as to trap Turkey in conditions of disempowerment. As Akbaşoğlu pointed out, the imposition of that particular parliamentary system on Turkey was no different from the way foreign tutelary centres had historically worked against Abdülhamid II, aiming at the disempowerment of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>55</sup>

47 Aslan, "Türkiye İçin Başkanlık Sistemi", pp. 20–25.

48 Bilici, Mücahit, "İki Türkiye ve Cumhurbaşkanlığı Seçimi", *Yeni Şafak* (21 March 2007).

49 AK Parti, "Yeni Türkiye Yolunda Daima Adalet, Daima Kalkınma. 7 Haziran 2015 Genel Seçimleri Seçim Beyannamesi" (Istanbul, 2015), pp. 30–31.

50 Castaldo, Antonino, "Populism and competitive authoritarianism in Turkey", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 18 (2018), 467–87.

51 "T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı: Yeni Anaya Hep Birlikte Temalı Programda Yaptıkları Konuşma" (28 January 2016), <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/38673/yeni-anayasa-icin-hep-birlikte-temalı-programda-yaptıkları-konusma>.

52 TBMM, *Anayasa Komisyonu Tutanak Dergisi. 4'üncü Toplantı*, p. 12.

53 Aslan, "Türkiye İçin Başkanlık Sistemi", p. 26.

54 Miş and Sobaci, "AK Parti ve Cumhurbaşkanlığı", p. 136.

55 TBMM, *Anayasa Komisyonu Tutanak Dergisi. 3'üncü Toplantı*, pp. 10–11.

## Imperial Restoration as the Remedy to Overcome Turkey's Historical Contradiction

In his work *Reason and Virtue (Akıl ve Erdem)*, İbrahim Kalın, senior advisor to President Erdoğan, argues that in order to overcome the 'Kemalist diversion' in the history and politics of Turkey, it is necessary to reconstruct its historical continuity through which society will reconnect with its Ottoman legacy.<sup>56</sup> Nostalgia for the glorious era of the Ottoman Empire has always been part of Turkish right-wing political rhetoric. However, it is also a fact that during AKP's rule imperial nostalgia has influenced both internal developments and foreign policy aspects, more than ever before. In this context, the republican past has been demonised and denounced as nothing but a Western conspiracy to weaken the nation's Muslim identity as well as Turkey's potential to lead the Muslim world.<sup>57</sup>

For Turkey's Islamic movement, the Ottoman Empire constitutes the 'masterpiece' of the nation's historic mission. It is the symbol of absolute consolidation of Turkish and Muslim capability to create empires.<sup>58</sup> It is the Ottoman legacy that safeguards the unique personality of Turkish society and distinguishes it from all others. It is the legacy that rescues the nation from mediocrity.<sup>59</sup>

The aforementioned selectivity with which AKP deals with Ottoman history, promotes nostalgia for imperial restoration based on the grandeur of the Ottomans. Key elements recognised in the Ottoman Empire are the strong state, which was always victorious in wars, and its competent power to expand its influence.<sup>60</sup> However, the strong emphasis on victorious wars is selective focusing only on those fought against non-Muslims, while systematically concealing confrontations and wars between Muslim states and populations.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, this attitude disregards the complexity of the historical development of the Ottoman Empire and more particularly of the process of its weakening and collapse. For Erdoğan, history does not include any grey areas

<sup>56</sup> Bora, "Esat Arslan İle İslamcılık", p. 70.

<sup>57</sup> Mert, Nuray, "The dream palaces of the Turks", *Hürriyet Daily News* (5 March 2018), <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/nuray-mert/the-dream-palaces-of-the-turks-128231>.

<sup>58</sup> Bora, *Cereyanlar*, p. 308.

<sup>59</sup> Saracoğlu, Cenk, "AKP Milliyetçilik ve Dış Politika: Bir Milliyetçilik Doktrini Olarak Stratejik Derinlik", *Alternatif Politika*, 5 (2013), 52–68.

<sup>60</sup> Yilmaz, Ihsan, *Creating the Desired Citizen: Ideology, State and Islam in Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 138.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

and cannot be a thing of the past. On the contrary, it is the element that frames the present political controversies and debates.<sup>62</sup>

For the Islamic movement and Turkish conservative thinkers in general, the Ottoman period is the 'golden age' that has been lost, a 'paradise' retrieved to point out the crisis of Kemalism.<sup>63</sup> The 'golden age' of the Ottomans is the epoch of consolidation of Turkish power and peaceful coexistence. It is the ultimate symbol of multiculturalism and the righteous rule of Turkish-Muslims over all ethno-religious identities. Imperial nostalgia is thus presented as a remedy for national and ethnic division.<sup>64</sup> This romanticisation of the Ottoman period ignores the conflicts, authoritarianism, and even heterogeneity that existed within the Empire in relation to the interpretation of Islam.<sup>65</sup> In this way Ottoman nostalgia selectively refers to an era of complete security, prosperity and development under the high supervision and competence of the Turkish-Muslim leadership.<sup>66</sup>

Many Islamist intellectuals and politicians propose 'peace-making' between the nation and its Ottoman past and legacy as the only way to overcome the alienation caused by the imposition of Kemalism. The specific political goal expressed is the 'reconnection of state and nation',<sup>67</sup> which presupposes the adaptation of the state to the traditional values of society.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, the nation should conquer state authority and attribute 'authentic characteristics' to it. Former AKP Vice President Numan Kurtulmuş described the aforementioned procedure as follows: 'Turkey has, after 200 years, reunited with its roots. This nation has brought its own children to power. The nation has taken over power and will not surrender it'.<sup>69</sup> The procedure described concerns the AKP's assertion that it identifies with the Turkish nation, which means that by being in power, the 'genuine nation' has reinstated its sovereignty and power after a period of 'artificial' and foreign-influenced Kemalist authority over the country.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Yavuz, M. Hakan, *Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 146–47.

<sup>63</sup> Fisher Onar, Nora, "Echoes of a universalism lost: rival representations of the Ottomans in today's Turkey", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 45 (2009), p. 235.

<sup>64</sup> Yayıcıoğlu, Ali, "AKP Türkiye'sinin Tarih Tezleri", *Gazete Oksijen* (2 April 2021), <https://gazeteoksijen.com/yazarlar/akp-turkiyesinin-tarih-tezleri/>.

<sup>65</sup> Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire*, p. 162.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>67</sup> Teazis, Christos, *İkincilerin Cumhuriyeti: Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (İstanbul: Mızrak Yayımları, 2010), pp. 59–60.

<sup>68</sup> Karasipahi, *Muslims in Modern Turkey*, p. 104.

<sup>69</sup> "Kurtulmuş Başkanlık Sistemi İçin Ne Dedi", *Haber 61* (27 April 2013).

<sup>70</sup> Alaranta, Toni, *National and State Identity in Turkey: The Transformation of the Republic's Status in the International System* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), p. 69.

This political programme has to be expressed accordingly in Turkey's domestic and foreign policy.<sup>71</sup> In other words, Turkey's 'return' to the civilisational system to which it belongs necessitates redesigning the political, economic and social structure. It requires a kind of restoration aiming to overcome the 'historical abnormality' caused by the Kemalist parenthesis. According to Davutoğlu, AKP is a restoration movement: 'AKP is a movement with members who emerged from the traditions of a state with historical roots and who aim to restore these very traditions'.<sup>72</sup> The distinct role of AKP as a political force of imperial restoration has also been stressed by Erdoğan: 'Our party is dedicated to the construction of a sturdy bridge between the country's glorious past and its future'.<sup>73</sup>

At this point it should be noted that the idea of restoration of the state as a platform for contestation of Kemalist republicanism is to be found in the political programmes of both the Islamic parties in Turkey and those of the wider Turkish right. It is important to mention that, for the Islamic movement, the idea of restoration prevailed historically not as a rejection of progress, but as a strong defence against the dogmas imposed from abroad. In this way, a large part of the Islamic parties and the wider centre-right in Turkey adopted the concept of 'civilisational restoration' against the foreign elements of the process of westernisation.<sup>74</sup> The revival of the genuine national culture (*milli kültür*) was considered one of the principal ways for the revival of the nation<sup>75</sup> and the resolution of crises in the country. Characteristically, Sezai Karakoç underlined the necessity of conducting a 'holy war' at a civilisational level, aiming to confront the negative consequences caused by the materialism and profanity of contemporary western civilisation.<sup>76</sup>

In this sense AKP's restoration resembles contemporary conservatism, which points to the renewal of tradition and the construction of a conservative regime that nonetheless secures its continuity in a new context. This version of conservatism does not lead to the complete rejection of the new.<sup>77</sup> AKP's contemporary conservatism points more to the conservation of all those that are

<sup>71</sup> Yaşılı, *AKP, Cemaat, Sünni-Ulus*, p. 147.

<sup>72</sup> İnsel, Ahmet, "Köklü Devlet Geleneğinin Restorasyonu", *Radikal* (26 August 2014).

<sup>73</sup> "AK Parti, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'ni Yaşatmak İçin Gece Gündüz Çalışan Bir Partidir" (14 August 2017), <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/80173/ak-parti-turkiye-cumhuriyetini-yasatmak-icin-gece-gunduz-calisan-bir-partidir.html>.

<sup>74</sup> Bora, *Türk Sağının Üç Hali*, p. 82.

<sup>75</sup> Taşkın, *Milliyetçi Muhafazakâr Entelijansıya*, p. 58.

<sup>76</sup> Karasipahi, *Muslims in Modern Turkey*, pp. 27–29.

<sup>77</sup> Bora, *Türk Sağının Üç Hali*, p. 54.

worth conserving<sup>78</sup> and to the reinstatement of part of the old regime adapted to current circumstances.<sup>79</sup> As Islamist intellectual Yusuf Kaplan advocates, the history of the Ottoman Empire proved that it was the only representative of an ecumenical civilisation under which true peace and justice were established.<sup>80</sup> These characteristics of an 'ecumenical impact' should be expressed in a mighty Turkish state. This specific form of restoration asserts imperial tradition as a component of the nation in the current circumstances. Davutoğlu remarks that the concept of restoration includes 'the ability to comprehend the spirit and dynamics of the times'.<sup>81</sup>

A few months after the 2018 parliamentary and presidential elections, Erdoğan stressed: 'We are on the eve of a new era. The name of this new era is revival. It will be a period when we realise our vision for a once again great Turkey'.<sup>82</sup> The phrase 'once again great Turkey' (*yeniden büyük Türkiye*) is of pivotal importance. It has been intensively used by almost all the parties of the Islamic National Outlook movement and indicates that Turkey had been great in the past, but then a period of weakening intervened. Therefore, the restoration of the 'once again great' and powerful Turkey concerns not the reestablishment of the Ottoman monarchy as such, but the regaining by Turkey of its imperial glory, importance and influence in the modern world.<sup>83</sup> As Erdoğan stated, '[w]e do not forget our nation's grandeur. Thus, nor do we forget the scale of the challenges we are asked to face. We stand strong with one foot in Istanbul, in Ankara, in our 81 provinces, but with the other foot we stride from Bosnia to Baku, from Samarkand to Khartoum and to the four corners of the earth'.<sup>84</sup>

At this point it is worth noting the connection of the vision for the restoration of a strong Turkey as expressed by Erdoğan with other similar cases. At the international level, the rise of authoritarian restoration has been most characteristically recorded in and manifested by Donald Trump's MAGA (*Make America Great Again*), the ideological platform that provided the framework for Brexit, as well as by the political programmes of leaders like Marine Le Pen,

<sup>78</sup> Bora, Tanıl, *Zamanın Kelimeleri: Yeni Türkiye'nin Siyasi Dili* (İstanbul: Birikim Yayınları, 2018), p. 65.

<sup>79</sup> İnsel, Ahmet, "Büyük Restorasyon Dönemi", *Birikim (Haftalık Yazalar)* (6 December 2014).

<sup>80</sup> Kaplan, Yusuf, "Dünya Osmanlı'ya Gebe...", *Yeni Şafak* (1 September 2014).

<sup>81</sup> Yaşlı, AKP, *Cemaat, Sünni-Ulus*, p. 148.

<sup>82</sup> "Başkan Erdoğan'dan TÜGVA Genel Merkezi Açılış Töreni'nde Önemli Açıklamalar", *Takvim* (21 October 2018), <https://www.takvim.com.tr/guncel/2018/10/21/baskan-erdogandan-tugva-genel-merkezi-acilis-toreninde-onemli-aciklamalar>.

<sup>83</sup> Bora, *Türk Sağının Üç Hali*, pp. 16–17.

<sup>84</sup> *Türkiye Bülteni*, 16/123 (September 2018), p. 20.

Narendra Modi or Jair Bolsonaro. A common component of this particular restoration is the ideological construction of a glorious past which should be 'reinstated'. This need is based on the arbitrary explanation of the causes of the deep social and moral crisis of our time. What is sought is the restoration of all those traditional elements and norms that were supposedly challenged by extreme modernisation.<sup>85</sup>

In the Turkish case, too, the quest for adjustment of imperial grandeur to twenty-first-century conditions and the intended 'return' of the country to its own civilisational basin are components of an imperial programme. Through the activation of concepts like restoration, AKP claims the creation of a new order in the country that can legitimise the reinstatement of hierarchical relations that had been disturbed with the dominance of Kemalism.<sup>86</sup> Therefore, it aims at the restoration of a conservative system of values (Islamic and Ottoman) that can legitimise inequality within a new framework. It is to be noted that AKP's conservative restoration contains a great leap into the past, without eradicating the importance of transformation for the future of power structures in Turkey. It attempts to combine return to a glorious Ottoman-Islamic system of values with building the framework of future power. It claims to correct what it considers 'Kemalist mistakes' of the past, but it preserves the goal of promoting its own political model for the future.<sup>87</sup> Volatility between the goal of marginalisation of the Kemalist system of values and the goal of revival of an Ottoman-Islamic one is clearly apparent in everyday AKP political practice. On the one hand, the governing party is widely promoted as a force for the restoration of the 'lost' state power of Turkey, and on the other hand as a power for structural reform within the modern framework. In this context, it is promoted as a power for the salvation of the state from a period of interregnum (*fetret devri*),<sup>88</sup> while claiming monopoly on resolving the historic contradiction mentioned above through the revival of the glorious Ottoman-Islamic (imperial) culture.

It is true that the position of the Ottoman Empire was a matter of ideological conflict in the writing and narration of Turkey's national history. The Islamist

<sup>85</sup> Geiselberger, Heinrich (ed.), *The Great Regression* (Cambridge and Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2017); Mondon, Aurelien, and Aaron Winter, *Reactionary Democracy: How Racism and the Populist Far Right Became Mainstream* (London and New York: Verso, 2020); Mudde, Cas, *The Far Right Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

<sup>86</sup> Ongur, Hakan Ovunc, "Plus ça change... Re-articulating authoritarianism in the New Turkey", *Critical Sociology*, 44 (2018), 45–59.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>88</sup> AK Parti, "Ahmet Davutoğlu'nun AK Parti 1. Olağanüstü Büyük Kurultayı Konuşması" (27 August 2014).

movement in the country aimed to create a rift in the prevailing narration of national history, converting the Ottoman past to a basis of alternative collective identity. In other words, it claimed the restoration of the Ottoman legacy as a structural element of national memory.<sup>89</sup> Even though the instrumentalisation of Ottoman history for the realisation of political goals had occurred in the past as well, with the Erdoğan government it displays some new qualitative characteristics. The selective use and politicisation of Ottoman history now concerns all aspects of society. It has gradually become part of everyday life practices.<sup>90</sup> The reinstatement of the imperial past, promoted by AKP, is carried out through symbols and concepts, through architecture, the mass media, education, and also through public ceremonies. In this way the 'ghost' of the Ottoman Empire is resurrected in the 'body' of the new national identity constructed by the authorities.<sup>91</sup>

The lavish shows celebrating the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans,<sup>92</sup> the establishment of museums dedicated to the conquest of the city,<sup>93</sup> the modernisation of the archives of the Ottoman Empire, as well as the change in the Presidential Palace protocol with guards dressed in 'Turkish imperial' uniforms,<sup>94</sup> are all part of the effort for the inculcation of a new history through which the Ottoman imperial legacy will be the core of national identity. However, for Erdoğan's government, the instrumentalisation of Ottoman history does not simply constitute a process of 'culturalisation of memory' with political aims. Rather, it is a complex process of selective definition of the past, aiming to determine the future orientations of the state.<sup>95</sup> Therefore, AKP 're-writes' history and at the same time underlines the importance of the current situation as proof of the necessity to strengthen state authority.<sup>96</sup> Erdoğan himself has characteristically indicated the unifying thread between the Ottoman Empire and his government, stating that "[j]ust like Mehmed the Conqueror built Rumelihisari before conquering Istanbul, so we build the new airport, the third bridge over the Bosphorus, the metro and the Eurasia tunnel.

89 Çınar, Alev, "National history as a contested site: the conquest of Istanbul and Islamist negotiations of the nation", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 43 (2001), 364–91.

90 Ongur, Hakan Ovunc, "Identifying Ottomanism: the discursive evolution of Ottoman pasts in the Turkish presents", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 51 (2015), p. 417.

91 Tokdoğan, *Yeni Osmanlıcılık*, p. 82.

92 Ongur, "Identifying Ottomanism", p. 421.

93 Koyuncu, Büke, "Benim Milletim...": AK Parti İktidarı, *Din ve Ulusal Kimlik* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2014), pp. 99–100.

94 "Karşılıkla Sırasındaki 16 Asker Ne Anlama Geliyor?", *Yeni Akit* (12 January 2015).

95 Çolak, Yılmaz, "Ottomanism vs. Kemalism: collective memory and cultural pluralism in 1990s Turkey", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 42 (2006), 587–602.

96 Tokdoğan, *Yeni Osmanlıcılık*, p. 83.

Just like our forefather drove his navy from the land, so we construct railway lines under the Bosphorus with Marmaray'.<sup>97</sup>

### The Presidential System: the 'New Turkey' Between Rupture and Civilisational Normalisation

The coexistence of 'reform-rupture' and 'restoration-normalisation' has been expressed relatively more clearly than the concept of 'New Turkey', which has as its basic characteristic the presidential system. The vision of a New Turkey demanded the adoption of a new political system that would be able to strengthen the country and activate its historical experience. According to AKP's official line, the presidential system, as a guarantee of a powerful and effective executive authority and state governance, is the only one that can respond to the needs of the New Turkey.<sup>98</sup> On the one hand, the new constitution and the presidential system is the permanent solution to the tension resulting from society's non-conformity to the 'alien civilisational system' imposed on it by authoritarian Kemalism. On the other, the presidential system can consolidate the social, economic and political transformation recorded under AKP governance.<sup>99</sup>

'New Turkey', a basic concept of the AKP's political programme, carries within it the fundamental point: the overthrow of the old as evil, anachronistic and invalid. 'New Turkey' is a concept that carries with it the anguish for revenge against the Kemalist past. It claims the creation of a state and society that will not be characterised by Kemalism.<sup>100</sup> Against the ideological background of 'New Turkey' are created political positions and rhetoric on issues of authenticity and cultural nostalgia for the native, as well as the boundaries of the sense of belonging to the nation.<sup>101</sup> At the same time, the notion of 'New Turkey' carries with it the ideological aspect of the founding of the new.<sup>102</sup> As such, it is an attempt to build a new political regime. The

97 "İstanbul'un Fethi'nin 562. Yıl Dönümü Kutlamalarında Yaptıkları Konuşma" (30 May 2015), <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/32584/istanbulun-fethinin-562-yil-donumu-kutlamalarinda-yaptıklari-konusma>.

98 AK Parti, "Yeni Türkiye Yolunda Daima Adalet, Daima Kalkınma. 7 Haziran 2015 Genel Seçimleri Seçim Beyannamesi" (İstanbul, 2015), pp. 30–31.

99 Mış, Nebi, and Ali Aslan, "Erdoğan Siyaseti ve Kurucu Cumhurbaşkanlığı Misyonu", *SETA Analiz*, no. 109 (2014), p. 18.

100 Bora, *Zamanın Kelimeleri*, p. 13.

101 Arat-Koç, "Culturalizing politics", p. 405.

102 Bora, *Zamanın Kelimeleri*, p. 14.

qualitative characteristics are shaped through a new founding philosophy and a new founding paradigm. This founding philosophy influences the content of the construction of social, political and public life. It has an impact on state-society relations.<sup>103</sup>

It is, therefore, not at all coincidental that the approval of a new constitution and the adoption of the presidential system was the focus of 'New Turkey'. The constitution has, in one way or another, the status of a founding document.<sup>104</sup> Such documents result from dramatic changes and symbolise the emergence of a new regime through ruptures and reversals.<sup>105</sup> The new constitution is in itself a dynamic of the 'new' that overthrows what had existed previously. Journalist Eyüp Can described this dynamic, saying 'For some time now, the system in Turkey is being re-established. And the problem is that whoever is in power wants to be the "founding father". Atatürk was the first founding father of the Republic. Erdoğan wants to be the second founding father'.<sup>106</sup> The more general attempt by AKP and Erdoğan to adopt the presidential system has been based, to a great degree, on the mobilisation of that social basis which felt marginalised by Turkey's founding Kemalist ideology. On the way to the presidential system, Erdoğan wanted to express the combination of 'native and national' values that Kemalism had ostracised. This combination was the fundamental part of a new social contract.<sup>107</sup> In this framework, the 2014 elections had the character of rejection, challenge or approval of Turkey's Kemalist founding ideology and Erdoğan's advantage was that he managed to represent that majority which sought reform or even overthrow of that founding ideology,<sup>108</sup> enabling the dominance of a new founding ideology.

The basic framework in which Erdoğan's presidential candidacy was presented and promoted in the 2014 elections was that of a 'founding mission'. The founding mission of the first president elected directly by the people included the establishment of new institutions of power, a new political culture and a new national identity. Erdoğan himself, presenting his 2014 candidacy, stressed, 'This very moment is not a farewell, it is not the end... It is a fresh start... It is a *fatiha*, a new beginning'.<sup>109</sup> The use of the term *fatiha* has a

<sup>103</sup> Yaşı, *AKP, Cemaat, Sünni-Ulus*, p. 25.

<sup>104</sup> Denk, Erdem, "Yeni Anayasa Tartışmaları: Dünya Devlete Dönerken", *Birikim*, 323 (2016), 7–15.

<sup>105</sup> Sevinç, Murat, "Anayasa Sözcüğündeki Sihir: Devlet Modeli, Yerelik, Özerklik", *Birikim*, 323 (2016), 16–23.

<sup>106</sup> Can, Eyüp, "Türkiye'nin İkinci Kurucu Babası Kim?", *Hürriyet* (13 May 2014).

<sup>107</sup> Dalay, Galip, "Cumhuriyetin Kurucu İdeolojisi ve Cumhurun Seçimi", *Sabah* (2 August 2014).

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> "İşte Erdoğan'ın Köşk Adaylığı Konuşması", *Aktif Haber* (1 July 2014).

deeper historical connotation. *Al-Fatiha* is the first chapter of the Koran, but at the same time it is considered the 'key' of Islam's holy book that contains the general message of Islam. Therefore, the political use of the term goes further than the simple religious message. It indicates the turning of a new page in the history of the country, towards the establishment of what came to be known as the New Turkey.

At a more practical level, Erdoğan's founding mission was mainly expressed by his readiness to use all the executive powers secured by Turkey's former constitution with no exception in a way that would push the country towards a de facto presidential system<sup>110</sup> or in a way that would create the preconditions for the approval of a new constitution with the presidential system. For Erdoğan himself the August 2014 presidential election was the start of a process for the establishment of New Turkey and 'the question of a new constitution was not a matter of choice but mandatory'.<sup>111</sup> Therefore, the direct election of the president by popular vote signified one of the pivotal stages in the closure of the 'Old Turkey' era.<sup>112</sup> The assumption of the presidency by Erdoğan on 28 August 2014 marked 'the first moments of the new beginning of the New Turkey'.<sup>113</sup> But the 'first moments of the New Turkey' went hand in hand with the construction of a glorious past, an imperial historic tradition, a historical reality from which the government chose the civilisational framework for the legalisation of the presidential system. On 28 August 2014 Erdoğan, as the newly elected President of Turkey, wrote in the formal guest book at the Atatürk Mausoleum, 'After your death on 10 November 1938, the distance between presidency and nation widened. Today is the day that Turkey is reborn from its ashes. Today, Turkey has embraced again its ancient (*kadim*) origins and reunited with its spirit and essence'.<sup>114</sup>

Just like the Kemalist new Turkey, AKP's New Turkey has a selective past. It does not choose to appropriate the immediate past, but the one before it, i.e. not Kemalist Turkey, but the Ottoman and Seljuk periods. According to Erdoğan, 'the Turkish Republic is the continuation of the Ottoman Empire, just like it is the continuation of the Seljuk and all our previous states. It is of course

<sup>110</sup> Miş and Aslan, "Erdoğan Siyaseti", p. 25.

<sup>111</sup> "TC Cumhurbaşkanlığı: Altıncı Muhtarlar Toplantısı'nda Yaptıkları Konuşma" (8 April 2015), <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/30100/altinci-muhtarlar-toplantisinda-yaptiklari-konusma>.

<sup>112</sup> "TC Cumhurbaşkanlığı: Devir Teslim Töreni'nde Yaptıkları Konuşma" (28 August 2014), <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/2931/devir-teslim-toreninde-yaptiklari-konusma>.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> "Veda Gününün Ayrıntıları", *Time Türk* (28 August 2014).

understood that the borders have changed, that the forms of government have changed, but the substance and soul remain the same'.<sup>115</sup> Being selective, the New Turkey is against the former 'Kemalist ancien régime' but promotes a new 'Islamic-conservative ancien régime'.<sup>116</sup> It retains peace-making and normalisation elements from the Ottoman past and insists on their modernisation so as to adapt to the new context of modern times. More specifically, the identity of the New Turkey revolves around the values of conservatism, traditional family, Sunni-Islamic traditions and imperial Ottoman history. At the same time the New Turkey expresses a civilisational mission which will materialise through a powerful state.<sup>117</sup> The importance of the state for the restoration of the national culture (*millî kültür*) is of strategic importance and supports the ideological trend that claims that Turkey's return to its civilisational basin is possible through politics 'from above',<sup>118</sup> i.e. through a powerful state authority that will care for the restoration of traditional values. AKP itself perceives its mission not as a government formation process, but rather as the strengthening of the state towards the restoration of a whole civilisation.<sup>119</sup>

The idea of a powerful state that is wholly reflected in the powerful executive authority is a significant expression of the ideology of almost the entire Turkish centre-right.<sup>120</sup> In this ideological trend the state is the ultimate symbol of power and the sole agent that can exert it.<sup>121</sup> The powerful state and the powerful executive authority are actually presented as a structural characteristic of the history and civilisation of the Turkish people. They are 'facts' that the Turkish people have carried within them from the depths of history and their glorious past. In this way the state and its strengthening are presented as the only means for the material as well as the spiritual development of the nation. A nation without a powerful state is destined to lose its culture and civilisation and is therefore doomed to extinction.<sup>122</sup> According to the Turkish right, the Ottoman Empire symbolises the glorious experience of transition from a small

<sup>115</sup> "Vefatının 100. Yılında Sultan Abdülhamid'i Anlamak' Konulu Konferansta Yaptıkları Konuşma" (10 February 2018), <https://tccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/90385/vefatinin-100-yılında-sultan-abdulhamidi-anlamak-konulu-konferansta-yaptıkları-konusma>.

<sup>116</sup> Bora, *Zamanın Kelimeleri*, p. 14.

<sup>117</sup> Seufert, Günter, "Erdoğan's New Turkey", *SWP Comments*, 44 (2014), p. 3.

<sup>118</sup> Taşkin, *Milliyetçi Muhalafakâr Entelijansıya*, p. 244.

<sup>119</sup> TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, 134'üncü Birleşim (Olağanüstü), 1 September 2014, p. 1233.

<sup>120</sup> Insel, Ahmet, "Başkanlık Sistemi ve Güç Fetisizmi", *Birikim*, 288 (2013), 8–14.

<sup>121</sup> Öztan, Güven Gürkan, "Türk Sağında Devlet Fetisizmine Dair", in *Türk Sağ: Mitler, Fetişler, Düşman İmgeleri*, İnci Özkan Kerestecioğlu and Güven Gürkan Öztan (eds) (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2016), pp. 427–28.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., pp. 437–38.

tribal state to an ecumenical empire. It symbolises at the same time the climax of the Turco-Islamic civilisation.<sup>123</sup>

In this context, the Ottoman Empire constitutes one of the most important examples that historically prove and convey to the present the 'Turkish ability and experience' in the creation and administration of states. In this theoretical framework, the Ottoman state evolves in a straight line; it is a homogeneous whole, without ethnic, religious or social differentiations.<sup>124</sup> Turkish nationalism and Islamism share the same view of an idealised Ottoman Empire—as a world power, but also as the most important historical proof of a glorious and victorious past of the Muslim Turks.<sup>125</sup> Using this selective view of the imperial past, a vision of a powerful Turkish state modelled on the Ottoman Empire has been created—a state able to lead today's world.<sup>126</sup> Within this context, civilisational restoration through a strengthened state and the normalisation of Turkey through return to its civilisational basin have concurrently legitimised the presidential system both as a necessity and as something entirely normal. In short, the adoption of the presidential system was presented by AKP as a civilisational necessity for the normalisation of Turkey. As Erdoğan has often stressed, “[t]he presidential system is in our genes. The element of a powerful leader is in our genes”<sup>127</sup>

Of course, the construction of a direct relationship between Islamic Ottoman civilisation and the presidential system is not a recent phenomenon as far as political confrontation is concerned. For example, many decades ago Ali Fuat Başgil used to stress that “[w]e are a nation that wants to see over it one and only authority. To elect among us this authority... After the abolition of the Sultanate and the Caliphate and supposedly with the aim of Turkey never being caught again in the storm of one-man rule, they created the National Assembly. That is, a ruler of a hundred heads and next to it they wanted to leave a President of the state as a ceremonial clerk.<sup>128</sup> This argument exemplifies the shared ideology of quite a number of right-wing parties, and was used in favour of the adoption of the presidential system. Both the National Order Party (*Milli Nizam Partisi*) and the National Salvation Party (*Milli Selamet Partisi*) of Necmettin Erbakan promoted the presidential system

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 441.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., pp. 440–41.

<sup>125</sup> Şen, Mustafa, "Transformation of Turkish Islamism and the rise of the Justice and Development Party", *Turkish Studies*, 11 (2010), p. 62.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., pp. 62–63.

<sup>127</sup> "Erdoğan: Başkanlık Sistemi Genlerimizde Var", *Yeni Şafak* (21 February 2015).

<sup>128</sup> Başgil, Ali Fuat, *İlmîn İşığında Günün Meseleleri* (İstanbul: Yağmur Yayımları, 1960), p. 39.

in their political programmes.<sup>129</sup> The proposal submitted by Erbakan to the competent National Assembly committee for reforms to the 1961 Constitution stated that '[h]istory is full of examples showing that our nation is successful in making great leaps forward and overcoming hurdles under the rule of leaders who have its full confidence. The abolition of all undemocratic laws which inhibit the practical expression of the material and spiritual abilities of our nation constitutes an obligation that historical truth puts on the table'.<sup>130</sup> Alparslan Türkeş' views belong to a similar value context. The leader of the Turkish extreme right considered reform of the constitution and the adoption of the presidential system necessary for the adaptation of the political system to the Turkish national structure and for the removal of phenomena like class society that he considered alien.<sup>131</sup>

Therefore, beside the arguments for government stability and economic development that the abolition of the constitutional system would bring about,<sup>132</sup> AKP insisted that its proposal concerning the presidential system was authentically Turkish because it incorporated elements of the traditions of the Turkic states, characterised by powerful executive authority.<sup>133</sup> Responding to opposition criticism that AKP insisted on the presidential system in order to reproduce Erdoğan's domination, then Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım argued 'Whose system is the presidential system? It is no one's personally. It is the result of 600 years of tradition in the governing of Turkey and the Turkish nation'.<sup>134</sup>

In effect, the presidential system was presented as a way of setting right a previous 'anomaly'. According to this view, the multi-headed power structure the constitutional system represented did not fit the Turkish civilisational and value system, because, as Burhan Kuzu noted, the view that had historically prevailed was that the state is responsible for everything.<sup>135</sup> Support for

<sup>129</sup> Milli Nizam Partisi, *Program* (İstanbul: Haktanır Basımevi, 1969), p. 10; Milli Selamet Partisi, 1973 *Seçim Beyannamesi* (İstanbul: Fatih Yayınevi, 1973), p. 17; Milli Selamet Partisi, 5 Haziran 1977 Seçimleri Seçim Beyannamesi (İstanbul, 1977), p. 89.

<sup>130</sup> Sevinç, Murat, *Türkiye'nin Anayasa İmtihani: Cumhurbaşkanlığı - Başkanlık Tartışması* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2017), p. 128.

<sup>131</sup> Türkeş, Alparslan, *Temel Görüşler* (İstanbul: Dergâh Yayınları, 1975), pp. 156–57.

<sup>132</sup> Esen, Berk, and Şebnem Gümüşçü, "A small yes for presidentialism: the Turkish constitutional referendum of April 2017", *South European Society and Politics*, 22 (2017), 303–26.

<sup>133</sup> İyimaya, Ahmet, "Başkanlık Sistemini Tartısmak Yahut AK Parti Modeli", *Yeni Türkiye*, 9/51 (2013), 52–63.

<sup>134</sup> Akyol, Taha, "Osmanlı ve Başkanlık", *Hürriyet* (9 January 2017).

<sup>135</sup> Kuzu, Burhan, "Türkiye İçin Başkanlık Hükümeti", *Amme İdare Dergisi*, 29/3 (1996), 57–84.

the presidential system was necessary since the historical and cultural basis of society was leading to the conclusion that a political system with all the power vested in one person was the most suitable.<sup>136</sup> At the same time, according to the ideological tradition of AKP, the adoption of the presidential system was the basic means to resolve the problem of civilisational alienation between the state and the authentic nation. Through this change the principle that 'sovereignty lies with the nation with no conditions or preconditions'<sup>137</sup> would be expressed to an absolute degree. The presidential system symbolised 'peace-making' between state structures and the nation, since it would reflect the civilisational values of the latter. As Mehmet Acet pointed out, '[t]he ideal way for the army and other vital state institutions not to be in a "position to be seized" passes through their reconstruction according to the average perception of Turkish society'.<sup>138</sup>

The direct election of the president by the people and the adoption of the presidential system were thus transformed into mechanisms for the promotion of 'reconciliation between state and nation'.<sup>139</sup> The direct participation of the nation in the choice of president was seen as the means to eradicate the alienation of the office and bestow upon the head of the state the status of 'authentic national leader'.<sup>140</sup> For example, according to AKP circles, one of the most important messages of the June 2018 presidential election was the emergence of Erdoğan 'as the most authentic part of Turkey's sociopolitical reality'.<sup>141</sup> In this way the 'genuine nation' would have a decisive role in the reconnection of state authority with the traditional values of society and in overcoming the artificial alienation imposed by Kemalist republicanism in the previous decades. As Erdoğan himself pointed out after his victory in the 2014 election, "[t]he state and the nation no longer have two separate directions. As of today they both face the same direction. They walk as one in the same direction".<sup>142</sup>

<sup>136</sup> Tozkoparan, "AK Parti Başkanlık Sistemini".

<sup>137</sup> TBMM, *Tutanak Dergisi*, 54'üncü Birleşim, 10 January 2017, p. 429.

<sup>138</sup> Acet, Mehmet, "Genelkurmay Savunma Bakanlığı'na Bağlandı, Şimdi Ne Olacak?", *Yeni Şafak* (16 July 2018).

<sup>139</sup> Teazis, *İkincilerin Cumhuriyeti*, p. 60.

<sup>140</sup> Uslu, Hasan Faruk, "De facto presidentialization in Turkey under Erdoğan's leadership" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Middle East Technical University, 2015), p. 127.

<sup>141</sup> "24 Haziran Millet-Devlet Birliktelliğini Somutlaştırdı", *Kriter*, 3/26 (July-August 2018), <https://kriterdergi.com/acik-oturum/24-haziran-millet-devlet-birlikteliginisomutlastirdi>.

<sup>142</sup> Yaşlı, *AKP, Cemaat, Sünni-Ulus*, p. 241.

The concept of reunification of state and nation has as its starting point AKP's understanding of a permanently suppressed Muslim conservative majority and a permanently suppressive Kemalist minority.<sup>143</sup> Thus, the new constitution and the direct election of the president by the people are a form of normalisation since they are based on the arbitrary view that the majority of the 'genuine nation' will permanently ensure that the 'problematic, alienated' and in many cases 'traitorous'<sup>144</sup> opposition will never again rise to power.<sup>145</sup> Therefore, the idea of Turkey's normalisation through the presidential system is the result of AKP's civilisational perception of Turkish society and its theory that the 'genuine majority' can permanently shut the door to power on those 'who do not identify with the culture, values and faith of the nation'.<sup>146</sup>

### Conclusion: the Problem(s) of a 'Turkish-Type' Presidential System

'The new constitution should in its spirit, word and method be a text which reflects the experiences of our nation, its culture, its history and its aspirations. When our nation sees this constitution it should see itself, its traditions and its history'.<sup>147</sup> With these words, Erdoğan pointed to the necessity for a new constitution with 'native and national' features, essential in the pursuit of a resolution to the basic contradiction that reproduced Turkey's alienation from its civilisational basin, namely the East. This ideological approach was particularly strong in the entire period leading up to the 2017 referendum, which approved the adoption of the presidential system. Since the end of 2016, AKP MPs have strongly stressed the 'native and national' character of their political aim at the National Assembly Constitutional Committee meetings, examining the proposal for reform of the constitution and adoption of the presidential system. The 'native and national' orientation of the proposal for constitutional amendment was the basis for the emergence of a 'Turkish-type' presidential system, i.e. a system of government adapted to Turkey's structure and peculiarities.<sup>148</sup> The presidential system was of a 'Turkish type' because,

<sup>143</sup> Alaranta, *National and State Identity in Turkey*, pp. 72–73.

<sup>144</sup> Esen and Gümüşçü, "A small yes for presidentialism".

<sup>145</sup> Mert, Nuray, "Presidential system as the majority's aspiration of power in Turkey", *Hürriyet Daily News* (23 January 2017).

<sup>146</sup> Tatlıcan, İsa, "İstemedikleri Başkanlık Değil Milli İrade", *Sabah* (2 February 2016).

<sup>147</sup> "T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı: Yeni Anayasa Hep Birlikte Temalı Programda Yaptıkları Konuşma" (28 January 2016), <https://www.cccb.gov.tr/konusmalar/353/38673/yeni-anayasa-icin-hep-birlikte-temalı-programda-yaptıkları-konusma>.

<sup>148</sup> TBMM, *Anayasa Komisyonu Tutanak Dergisi. 1inci Toplantı* (20 December 2016), p. 61.

according to AKP, it incorporated both the distinct historic experience of the country and the 'native and national' perceptions.<sup>149</sup>

On the basis of this ideological stance, the success of Turkey's return to its true history and geography was possible only if the spirit of the constitution and the presidential system embodied 'native and national' values. Only through such a constitution could Turkey once again be embraced by the geography and civilisation from which it had been cut off.<sup>150</sup> However, the concept of 'native and national' as adapted to the new constitution and the presidential system causes, among others, two basic problems. At a primary level, the problem is caused by the relation of the concept of 'native and national' to ecumenical norms. According to Cihat Barış, 'native' and 'national' 'have an introvert orientation. An extrovert perception has no relation to native and national'.<sup>151</sup> The 'Turkish-type' presidential system strives not to be a copy or imitation of Western models, but at the same time this creates the risk of divergence from universally accepted democratic standards.<sup>152</sup> At a second level, the aim of adopting a Turkish-type presidential system based on the necessity for civilisational normalisation of the country undermines the need for a new constitution as a true democratisation move.<sup>153</sup>

The ideological legitimisation of the presidential system through a civilisational framework, as well as the interpretation of the civilisational framework through the ideological approach of the Islamic movement and the wider Turkish right, created the prospect of a deepening polarisation in society. On the one hand, the concept of democracy was further reduced to the election process, putting in doubt the existence of other social and political checks and balances and democratic action.<sup>154</sup> On the other hand, the attempt to overcome the 'multi-headed' power structure regarded as civilisationally alien to Turkey created the preconditions for the questioning of the concept of separation of powers,<sup>155</sup> and steered the system towards unity and harmony of powers under the exclusive control of the elected but sole leader.<sup>156</sup>

<sup>149</sup> TBMM, *Anayasa Komisyonu Tutanak Dergisi*, 3'üncü Toplantı, p. 17.

<sup>150</sup> Abak, Şaban, "Yeni Anayasanın Ruhu", *Yeni Şafak* (24 January 2013).

<sup>151</sup> Barış, Cihat, "Yerlilik ve Millilik Çimentosu", *Diriliş Postası* (5 July 2017).

<sup>152</sup> Çınar, Menderes, "AKP'nin İlkinci 'Başkanlık Sistemi' Hamlesi", *Birikim*, 336 (2017), 12–17.

<sup>153</sup> İnsel, "Başkanlık Sistemi", p. 11.

<sup>154</sup> Çınar, "AKP'nin İlkinci 'Başkanlık Sistemi'", p. 14.

<sup>155</sup> Yabancı, Bilge, "Populism as the problem child of democracy: the AKP's enduring appeal and the use of meso-level actors", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 16 (2016), 591–617.

<sup>156</sup> TBMM, *Anayasa Komisyonu Tutanak Dergisi*, 3'üncü Toplantı, p. 63.

As Şule Özsoy Boyunsuz points out, presenting the strict separation of powers and the existence of constitutionally entrenched control mechanisms of the executive as agents of destabilisation has created the preconditions for the imposition of 'hyper presidentialism'.<sup>157</sup> Furthermore, the imposition of a civilisational framework with an absolutist interpretation of 'native and national' criteria as the basis of constitutional reform has created more centres of social polarisation. The goal of 'reconnection of state and nation' through a 'Turkish-type' presidential system, defined as such by the dominant power, eventually meant the reconnection of a specific part of society and the exclusion of another<sup>158</sup>—that which did not meet the 'native and national' criteria of the pursued civilisational normalisation.

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<sup>157</sup> Boyunsuz, Şule Özsoy, "The AKP's proposal for a 'Turkish type of presidentialism' in comparative context", *Turkish Studies*, 17 (2016), 68–90.

<sup>158</sup> Bora, "Esat Arslan İle İslamcılık", p. 71.