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RIGHT WING POPULISM VS. LEFT WING POPULISM: CLASH OF ALLIANCES IN TURKISH POLITICAL SYSTEM

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the effects of right and left-wing populism before the 2023 elections on the Turkish Political System. In this direction, the study argues that the People's Alliance, formed with the AKP-MHP alliance, has adopted right-wing populism and the Nation Alliance, which was established in partnership with four opposition parties (CHP-IYIP-SP-DP) and currently expanding to six opposition parties (CHP-IYIP-SP-DP-DEVA-GP), adopted left-wing populism. In line with the findings obtained in the study, it is argued that the 2019 elections are actually a "clash of alliances" and thus right-left populism. Accordingly, the study describes the 2019 elections as a "limited" success for left-wing populism. Considering that the alliances have increased their discourse and strategies in the last period, the article describes the 2023 elections as the "real clash of alliances", and argues that the election result revealed that although a significant rise in left populism is observed, right-wing populism is dominant in Turkish politics. For now, right axis of populism is the winner in Turkish Political System.

Keywords: *Populism, Left-right wing populism, Alliances, Turkish Political System, 2023 General Elections.*

SAĞ POPÜLİZM VE SOL POPÜLİZM: TÜRK SİYASAL SİSTEMİNDE İTTİFAKLARIN ÇATIŞMASI

Öz

Bu çalışma, 2023 seçimleri öncesi sağ ve sol popülizmin Türk Siyasal Sistemi üzerindeki etkilerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu doğrultuda çalışma, AKP-MHP ittifakıyla oluşan Cumhur İttifakı'nın sağ popülizmi, ve dört muhalefet partisi (CHP-IYIP-SP-DP) ile ortaklaşa kurulan ve DEVA ve Gelecek Partisi (GP) katılımıyla genişleyen Millet İttifakı'nın ise sol popülizmi benimsediğini öne sürmektedir. Çalışmada elde edilen bulgular doğrultusunda 2019 seçimlerinin aslında bir "ittifaklar ve dolayısıyla sağ-sol popülizmin bir çatışması" olduğu ileri sürülmektedir. Buna göre çalışma, 2019 seçimlerini sol popülizm için "sınırlı" bir başarı olarak tanımlamaktadır. İttifakların 2023 seçiminde söylemlerini ve stratejilerini artırdığı göz önünde bulundurularak, 2023 seçimlerini "gerçek ittifak çatışması" olarak nitelendiren yazıda, seçim sonucunun sol popülizmde ciddi bir yükseliş gözlemlense de Türk Siyasal Sisteminde kazananın sağ popülizm olduğu, Türk siyasetinde şimdilik sağ popülizmin hâkim olduğunu gösterdiği sonucuna varılmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Popülizm, Sağ-sol popülizm, İttifaklar, Türk Siyasal Sistemi, 2023 Genel Seçimleri.*

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Introduction

This study aims to contribute to the literature in terms of investigating the effects of right and left populism on the formation of alliances in the Turkish Political System. In this direction, the discourses of the alliance leaders in the election studies were used in this study, and it was aimed to draw attention to the extent to which the right and left populism differ in terms of inclusiveness and exclusivity in their discourses to the electorate. It was analyzed in the study, before the 2023 election, on what basis the alliance leaders, who were in two different populism axes, built the us and them dichotomy. In this context, it has been observed that as the election approaches, the harshness and polarization of the rhetoric of the People's Alliance (Cumhur İttifakı) increases. On the other hand, the Nation Alliance (Millet İttifakı) has built the us and them dichotomy on a socio-economic basis in the form of economically privileged and disadvantaged segments. One of the most important points obtained in the study is that both alliance member parties are not natural alliances in terms of either the party strategy they implement or the ideologies they adopt. So much so that the MHP (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi-Nationalist Movement Party) and the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi-Justice and Development Party) clashed with the Kurdish opening (democratic opening) policy of the AKP in the past, and the leaders of both parties criticized each other. Similarly, the parties that are members of the Nation Alliance do not form a natural alliance with each other, and the fact that DEVA (Demokrasi ve Atılım Partisi-Democracy and Progress Party) and Future Party (Gelecek Partisi-GP), two parties founded by former AKP members, also join the alliance. This political conjuncture emphasizes the unusualness of the formation conditions of both the Nation Alliance and the People's Alliance. Another noteworthy point regarding alliances is that HDP (Halkların Demokratik Partisi-People's Democratic Party), one of the minority parties with the highest vote base in the Turkish Political System, is not included in both alliances.

In line with these points, in the following part of the study, firstly the theoretical framework was established, the definition and scope of populism are included in the views and discussions in the literature. After the characteristics and strategies of populism and populist leaders, the study focused on the distinction between right and left populism, and this distinction was examined under three categories as which ideology two types of populism are close to, its inclusiveness towards grassroots and its attitude towards democracy. In the implementation phase of the study, the characteristics of AKP as a right-wing populist party were emphasized, and Erdoğan's charismatic authority as a right-wing populist leader and his discourses were analyzed to reveal how he has built the us and them dichotomy since 2002 when he came to power. However, the successful mass mobilization that he has implemented for years was not sufficient for Erdoğan's rule alone; important breaking points in Turkish politics made Erdoğan need alliance support. Therefore, the following part of the study is on the AKP-MHP alliance and the right-wing populist analysis of this alliance, and it has been pointed out how the two leaders reinforced the polarization in their discourse and built their bases on a nationalist-religious basis. Accordingly, in the last part of the study, the expansion process of the Nation Alliance towards the table of six was discussed, and attention was drawn to how the alliance's discourses overlapped with left populism, and the "palace and people"-themed discourses of the alliance leaders were emphasized. Working in line with this whole pattern, attention was drawn to the 2019 elections, the first clash of the two alliances or the two opposites of populism, and their results, and in this context, the strategies of the alliances before the second and main clash, the 2023 elections, were analyzed.

In the light of all these points, the study examines the discourses of party leaders in analyzing the position of right and left populism in the Turkish political system. In the relevant discourse analysis, the discourses during the election campaigns held before the 2023 election were examined. In this way, it was questioned which populist axis was dominant in which alliance, through the discourses of the party leaders who formed the alliances during the election campaigns before the 2023 general elections.

1.Theoretical Framework: Populism

Although there are many definitions and interpretations of populism in the literature, Ostiguy has made one of the clearest definitions, describing populism as "the flouting of the low", which he stated has two subjects as the political relationship between political leaders and the social base (Ostiguy, 2017:73). In line with this

definition, Ostiguy considers populism not in a top-down fixed form, but rather as a two-pronged phenomenon that takes place between the leader and his supporters, based on a common socio-cultural or politico-cultural basis (Ostiguy, 2017:73). Mudde and Kaltwasser(2017:4), on the other hand, describe populism as the emergence of a strong and charismatic leader, gathering power and communicating with the masses. For Laclau, on the other hand, populism encompasses “a social scene that divides society into enemy and underdog”, into two opposing and irreconcilable camps (Laclau, 2005:87). Although it has many different definitions like above, common to populism is the existence of two opposing camps built on an antagonistic relationship. Populist leaders present themselves as the only savior and defender to the lower strata of this oppressed and ignored society, and derive their strength from this point. Enemy construction is essential for a populist leader, as the existence of an antagonistic and irreconcilable opposition camp allows populist leaders to consolidate their mass.

As Mudde underlines, the polarization of “us” and “them” in populism means the dichotomic division of society under the name of “the people” and “the elite” (Mudde, 2007:23). Here, it should be underlined that although the dichotomy of us and them in populism, the opposing camps are expressed by different names such as the lower class/upper class, the dominant group/silent majority, the oligarchy/the people, the underdog/system, (Laclau,2005:87; Ostiguy,2017:76) lies the relationship of the people against the elite. Based on all these points, Mudde makes one of the most general definitions of populism, and defines it as “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be “ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will)¹ of the people.”(Mudde,2004:543)

Shils underlined a very important point about populism; stated that the will of the people in populism is superior to all other institutions and standards (Shils,1996:98), and stated that in a sense, there is no intermediary institution between the leader and the people in populism. Concerning the same point, Weyland made a similar determination, stating that “the leader reaches the followers in a direct, quasi-personal manner that bypasses established intermediary organizations, especially parties.” (Weyland,1999:381) Moffitt states at this point that the leaders tended to portray themselves as “having extreme intimacy with the people” and with the aim of “embodying the expression of the popular will” (2016:96).

In populism, there is an environment in which the demands and rights of the silent majority have been systematically ignored by the elite for a long time and they feel anger towards the ruling-elite class because of this marginalization. As Mudde emphasizes, populist leaders who are aware of the sense of belonging that this silent majority, whose demands are ignored, and the anger they feel against the elite class, aim to create an “imaginary community” rather than an all-encompassing and real community (Mudde,2004:546) Considering that Laclau’s definition of populism as the result of unfulfilled demands of the silent majority,(2005:86) the most important skill/strategy of populist leaders is to manipulate this demand by forming an imaginary unity. (Dinçsahin,2012:625) Using this victimization of the silent majority whose demands are not met, systematically ignored and filled with anger against the ruling elite, communicating directly with this mass and portraying itself as the defender and savior of this mass requires charismatic authority and the ability to mobilize the masses for a populist leader.

1.1. Left-Right Wing Populism: Scopes and Differences

The comparison of right and left populism is so important that, according to Mouffe, the mindsets of these two types of populism will form the basis of political conflicts in the next few years. (Mouffe,2018:6) Comparing left-right populism from different perspectives such as which ideology they are close to in terms of their arguments, inclusiveness towards the grassroots (exclusive-inclusive), attitude towards democracy will provide a wider framework.

¹ The concept of general will, which was first used in political philosophy by Rousseau and means the will of the people as a whole, is also defended by populists. According to populists, who argue that politics should reflect the general will of the people, people are homogeneous and have the same interests and preferences. In addition, according to populists, the elites are out of touch with the public and create problems. On the other hand, populists argue that they base their policies on the general will and thus can find solutions to complex problems (Mudde, 2017:33).

Left populism, as March (2007:66) stressed, is to the left of the populist axis in that they create the dichotomy of “decisive elites versus moral people”, their emphasis on egalitarianism, and their portrayal of economic inequality as the root of current political and social problems in societies. However, considering the arguments of left and right-wing populism, there are also views that associate left populism with socialism and right populism with nationalism (Mudde,2017:21). The ideology that right- and left-wing populism are close to is actually directly related to which class the elite pole they built in their populist arguments represents. In this context, while left-wing populism defines the elite class as a class with economic privilege, right-wing populism considers the elite class as not “us”, on the basis of identity and nationalism. As Rummens (2017:559) points out, given that populism is largely identity-based, right-wing populism deals with this identity on an ethnic-cultural basis, while left-wing populism deals with it within the framework of economic categories (such as working class, middle class, peasant). In addition, as Mouffe (2018:45) emphasizes, left populism does not aim at a break from the democratic liberalist framework and the construction of a completely new order, but rather a struggle against the common enemy, the economic elite, in which the working class and the insecure middle class are at the center of this struggle, within the framework of seeking to deepen democracy. Although there are some reservations about the approach of the right populist leaders to democracy due to their exclusionary attitude towards the opposite pole, it is generally thought that the right populist leaders will not pose a threat to democracy as long as the system they belong to is democratic (Splitter,2018:115). However, it is against the nature of participatory democracy that right-wing populist leaders, who claim to bring democracy back, make this claim while excluding those they see as a threat to society (Şener vd. ,2022:131). Therefore, the approaches of right and left populism to democracy are closely related to inclusiveness towards the opposite pole, and left populism seems closer to democracy.

Considering the attitude of two types of populism in their polarization of “them”, Mudde and Kaltwasser state that left populism tends to be inclusive and right populism tends to be exclusive (2012). As underlined by Verbeek and Zaslove (2017:392), left-wing populism, unlike right-wing populism, does not confine people within nationalist borders, but rather treats it as a social category. Roberts (2017:299) cites Europe, which has a highly exclusionary attitude towards cultural minorities, as an example of the inclusiveness of left and right-wing populism. On the other hand, he states that left-wing populism has a more inclusive nature as it draws the other pole not within nationalist borders but rather within the framework of the political and economic elite. Based on all these determinations, Filc (2015:265) states that the main aim of inclusive (left) populism is the integration of the marginalized groups and in this context, it functions to expand democracy. On the other hand, he underlines that exclusionary populism embraces the “national people” ethnically and culturally and sees the other people as a threat. In line with all these points, the next sections of the study will reveal the reflection of the strategies and ideologies of these populist axes on Erdogan’s administration and the electoral strategies of the Nation and the People’s Alliance.

It will be useful to draw attention to an important point here; Discourse is a key tool for right-wing populist parties and leaders to deepen the us and them dichotomy by building fear. So much so that right-wing populist parties and their leaders can legitimize their policies by successfully creating fear in society (Wodak, 2015: 1-5). According to Wodak (2013: 26-27), the policies of right-wing populist parties are based on declaring the minority forming the them pole as responsible for all problems and a threat to the us pole, in other words, building “discourses of fear”. In this way, right-wing populist leaders ignite discontent in society through such discourses and portray themselves and their party as the key to getting out of this dissatisfied situation. In short, discourse is a very important tool that provides legitimacy to right-wing populist party policies and reinforces the leader’s charismatic authority. In short, this study questions which of the right and left populist axis it is closer to, through the discourses of the two alliances in Turkish Politics during the 2023 general elections.

2.The Establishment and Consolidation of the AKP: Right-Wing Populism in Türkiye

AKP government and Erdogan leadership are typical examples of populism in Türkiye² (Erdem and Öniş, 2014:44). As Çelik and Balta pointed out, AKP government is a typical example of populist parties and Erdoğan is a typical example of a charismatic leader (2018:3). In order to seize the charismatic leadership and consolidate the masses, and to portray himself as the defender / savior of the people in this direction, Erdoğan implements a populist strategy of rebelling against the existing order. His charismatic leadership has consolidated his audience for many years, allowing him to hold and centralize his power. As Selçuk stated, Erdoğan, who is nicknamed as “tall man” or “chief” by the people, portrays him as the defender of the marginalized segment in the old Türkiye and the savior of the new Türkiye (2016:576)

The old-new Türkiye distinction, which constitutes an important part of Erdogan’s populist policies, is actually associated with the distinction between White Turks and Black Turks. In this regard, while White Turks are members of the military class, Western-looking, and have a secular lifestyle, which was influential during the founding and reform periods of the Republic of Türkiye; Black Turks are the conservative and Islamic part of the society, and are in the lower class in terms of education and income, corresponds to the segment that has been in an advantageous position for years (Gürsoy,2021:169; Yilmaz,2017:483; Ferguson,2014:78; Yilmaz and Shipoli,2022:325). Within the framework of this polarization, Erdoğan argued that the Kemalist group, which he described as the elite, applied discriminatory and oppressive policies towards the conservative part of the society during the reformation and Westernization of Türkiye; accused this elite group of being ‘out of touch from the real values of society’ (Çapan and Zarakol, 2019:276).

As Selcuk (2016:577) underlines, Erdogan associates the old Türkiye and the CHP (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi-Republican People’s Party) government with military coups, coalition governments, instability and economic crises, while associating the new Türkiye under AKP rule with prosperity, stability and single-party rule, draws a sharp contrast between the two periods. In this regard, Erdogan reminds his audience that he is also one of the victims of the old Türkiye, referring to the prison decision in 1998 for the accusation of “inciting the public to enmity”(Milliyet, 1998). In the framework of all these grievances, Erdoğan emphasizes at every opportunity that a new and stronger Türkiye needs his leadership as a defender of the conservative part of the society that has been ignored for years and not to experience the old traumas again (Çelik and Balta,2018:8). As Dinçşahin (2012:621) underlined, the prohibition of entering the university and public places, which was implemented within the framework of the principle of secularism in the process of reforming the old Türkiye, the difficulties experienced by the graduates of Imam-Hatip schools in university entrance were harshly criticized by Erdoğan.

These unjust and exclusionary policies of the old Türkiye against a certain segment of the society played a major role in making the CHP and Kemalist-secular segments, which AKP and Erdoğan call the elite segment, the subject of enemy construction. Considering that the political life of the Turkish Republic, including the reform process from its establishment, has experienced the single-party rule of the CHP established by Atatürk for a significant period of time, Erdoğan identifies all the problems and negativities of the old Türkiye and this period with the CHP. Associating all the problems of the old Türkiye with the CHP, Erdoğan held the CHP responsible for the military coups of Turkish political life, and continued to place the CHP as an enemy in the opposite pole in his discourses:

“Frankly, it is imperative that the CHP give this nation a comprehensive and sincere self-criticism about its own history. From the execution of Iskilipli Atif Hodja to the Dersim events, from the persecution of the Turkish adhan to its role in the May 27 coup, the CHP did not have the courage to face its own history” (AA,2019)

² Although it is argued that it has shifted towards left-wing populism in terms of some of its policies and discourses, the literature mainly argues that the AKP’s policies are right-wing populist. According to Karataşlı and Kumral (2023:25), AKP, which is actually a right-wing populist party, started to exhibit heterodox structure characteristics after the MHP alliance and does not fully comply with precise definitions. For example, considering that right-wing populist parties have an anti-immigrant and racist tendency, it seems that the AKP’s attitude towards immigration and racism contradicts this situation. However, due to the views that the main reason underlying the AKP’s approach towards immigrants and racism is to gain advantage in relations with European countries rather than hospitality (Karataşlı and Kumral, 2023: 25), and because most of the party’s active policies and discourses still predominantly display right-wing populism characteristics, the AKP is still described as a right-wing populist party in the literature.

In this context, Erdogan tries to make the current CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu paint a negative image in front of the society by addressing him as “Mr. Kemal”. In this context, in a speech he made about the Gezi Park protests, Erdoğan accused the opposition party of the protest of being terrorists, claimed that they had deliberately polluted a mosque during the protests, and did not neglect to associate this event with the CHP and Kılıçdaroğlu.

In this whole “old Türkiye-new Türkiye” dichotomy, Erdoğan’s enemy construction pole does not only form the CHP in the context of domestic politics, but also many other groups and opposition groups take their place in the construction of the other. In this context, Erdogan places opposition groups such as “Fetö supporters” (Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organisation Fetöcü), “Gezi Supporters (Gezici)”, PKK members in the “us and them” dichotomy, and labels this group with othering discourses such as traitors, terrorists, and marauders, pro-coups. In response to this polarizing political rhetoric, Erdogan tries to keep his audience consolidated by calling his audience under the name of my brothers, my sisters with turbans, heroes (Selçuk,2016:578). Following a typical populist policy, Erdogan aims to consolidate his own audience and place him in a superior position against the other, with antagonistic denominations to the opposition. Thus, Erdoğan describes all the people and groups in the opposition as traitors, underlines that this is the biggest obstacle in front of Türkiye, and associates all these groups with the “old Türkiye”. In this context, Erdogan, who presents the elections as the only way out for the people and the country, directs the “patriotic people” to vote for the new Türkiye, namely the AKP:

This parallel structure, this parallel organization is the last obstacle in front of Türkiye, the last gang in Türkiye. We will liquidate him, and we will expel these traitors. Then there will be no obstacles in front of Türkiye. You will make a choice on March 30, you will say either the old Türkiye or the new Türkiye (Trthaber,2014).

Against all this exclusionary attitude towards the Islamic-conservative segment, Erdoğan stands out as a charismatic leader, portraying himself as the hope of the Muslim people, namely the Ummah, not only in Türkiye but around the world, thus aiming to consolidate the conservative segment in society (Özpek and Yaşar,2018:210). Within the framework of the purpose of addressing the Ummah, Erdogan frequently refers to the glorious days of the Ottoman period, thus trying to place Türkiye and the Muslim people in a superior position vis-à-vis the West (Erçetin and Boyraz,2023 :83).

At this point, it should be noted that within the scope of Erdogan’s populist policies, the construction of enemies is very important not only in domestic but also in foreign policy. Such that, for the AKP and Erdogan, the construction of an external enemy is as necessary as the construction of an internal enemy. At this point, for Erdoğan, external enemies are called external forces (dış güçler) or external outbreaks (dış mihraklar), and units such as Western countries or international organizations can also be included in this classification. As Erçetin and Erdoğan underline, in this direction, in the us and them dichotomy of AKP and Erdoğan, “us” are fixed and represent the mass of supporters of the party. On the other hand, “them” can be considered in two separate categories as internal and external them. They can be pointed out as any organization that is called elite, such as parties, think tanks, and the media, which is opposed to the AKP. In the framework of all this enemy construction, Erdogan does not neglect to emphasize that internal and external enemies cooperate with each other in order to fuel negativity and hostility towards the “them” pole (Erçetin and Erdoğan, 2018:395). Criticizing the Gezi Park protests at the rally in Samsun, Erdoğan attributed the following economic crisis and Gezi Park protests to internal and external forces:

“Who won from these three weeks of demonstrations? The interest lobby won, Turkey’s enemies won, the rent lobby won. Even a little, Türkiye’s economy lost, tourists lost” (NTV,2013).

The populist policies implemented within the framework of all this charismatic authority have enabled Erdoğan to mobilize his audience since 2002, when he came to power, and not to be criticized by his audience and his party, even during the negative processes of the AKP. Çelik and Balta relate Erdogan’s ability to mobilize these masses with “blame attributions”, thus, when the masses identify themselves with the leader, it becomes easier to connect with the masses in situations of social crisis, and when the feeling of anxiety gives way to anger, populist leader gathers more support from the masses (2018:7). The most concrete example of this situation was that when Erdoğan called for the people to take to the streets during the July 15 coup attempt, Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organisation (Fetö) was held responsible for the attempt, increasing the anger of the people and giving

stronger support to the failure of the coup attempt. All this mobilization and centralization of power enabled Erdoğan to present himself to his masses as the only way out for a strong Türkiye against internal and external enemies, which is evident in his discourse at the party meeting in Erzincan:

“We must explain very well to our nation that the issue is not the AK Party issue, the issue is not Tayyip Erdoğan’s issue, but a Türkiye-Turkish nation issue. If the opposite happens, we will all be losers. If the AK Party wins, Türkiye wins, let’s know it like this. If the AK Party loses, Türkiye loses. We did not touch, we did not shake our hearts, we will not leave a hand.” (Cumhuriyet,2017)

Turkish political life witnessed various populist strategies throughout the AKP rule, which started in Türkiye with its seizure of power in 2002. However, after the 2010 referendum and 2013 Gezi Park protests, within the framework of centralized power, Erdoğan’s populism began to gain an exclusionary character, and this exclusion became more acute with the AKP-MHP alliance (Gürsoy, 2021:171; Erçetin and Boyraz, 2023). With this alliance, Turkish political life began to witness various strategies and discourses of exclusive right-wing populism.

2.1. Expansion of Right-Wing Populism: People’s Alliance

As underlined by Ersoy and Karakoç, the main reason why the AKP needs an alliance with a party in the Turkish parliament after 2015 is that it lost its majority in the parliament to seize power as a single party (2020:208). The AKP’s loss of power did not emerge out of nowhere, it took place gradually over time, and the policies that hardened after the 2010 presidential referendum and the attitude of the government during the 2013 Gazi Park Protests are just a few of these factors. One of the striking points regarding the AKP-MHP alliance is that the two parties are not natural allies in terms of both their ideologies and party policies. In fact, as Yılmaz and Demir underline, although there are examples where the two parties have criticized each other harshly in the past, the main factor in this matter is the HDP (2021:7).

Considering that the MHP is on the far-right wing of Turkish political life, it is not surprising that it is in sharp opposition to the HDP, which is fighting for the rights of Kurdish minorities in Türkiye. So much so that between 2012 and 2014, AKP’s democratic initiative or Kurdish opening policies were described as ‘treason’ by MHP leader Bahçeli (Celep,2010:136). However, AKP-MHP relations, which had a very tense nature between this period, evolved over time into a positive direction and resulted in an alliance in 2018.

The AKP-MHP alliance, which was established in 2018 under the name of the “People’s Alliance” (Cumhur İttifakı), in a sense means a serious loss in Kurdish votes for the AKP, and Demirtaş, one of the HDP leaders, who was sentenced to prison for terrorism-related crimes in 2016, was also effective in this loss. In this direction, Demirtaş criticized the AKP-MHP alliance:

“The goal is to make the AKP-MHP rule permanent by liquidating the HDP. They are trying to keep the HDP out of possible alliances by criminalizing its legitimacy and making it a debate” (Tiraj,2022).

The alliance established after all this political background and conflicts between the two parties has been an important turning point in Turkish political life in this respect. For Erdoğan and Bahçeli, who need to consolidate their party members after all these conflicts and criticisms between the two parties that have been witnessed in the past, the most important tool in this regard will undoubtedly be the construction of an enemy. Erdoğan and Bahçeli first implemented this enemy construction before the referendum in 2017, and during this period, party members and public supporters were described as patriots, while the opposition was labeled as traitors and pro-coup, and the society was divided into these two poles (Yılmaz and Shipoli,2022:322).

The opposition between us and them, established by the leaders during the AKP-MHP alliance period, has become so sharp that Turkish political life has witnessed very harsh and polarizing discourses throughout this period. The clearest example of this is seen in Erdoğan’s speech before the 2019 local elections, and in his discourse, Erdoğan associated the candidate of the Nation Alliance, Ekrem İmamoğlu, with the Egyptian pro-coup Sisi, thus consolidating his mass and aiming to fuel the feeling of hostility towards the opposite pole:

“This CHP mentality, what did its peers say about me? When Morsi is imprisoned, ‘Erdogan’s fate will be like him.’ they were saying. Shall we say Sisi or Binali Yildirim on Sunday? The issue is that important. Those who liken Erdogan’s fate to Morsi’s is the Sisi mentality. That’s why we have to work hard for it. We are not afraid of them. We have already set out on this road wearing our shroud” (Cumhuriyet,2019).

At this point, it should be noted that Erdogan and Bahçeli often tended to use flag, nation, state-themed discourses to keep their masses consolidated during the construction of the enemy. In this context, the harshness of the two leaders’ rhetoric and their exclusionary attitude towards the opposition in the AKP-MHP alliance have increased. The AKP government, which has been subjected to harsh criticism especially due to the economic crisis and high inflation, resorts to the aforementioned flag and nation-themed discourses, and the statement of the Minister of Treasury and Finance Nurettin Nebati is an example of this:

“Currently, Türkiye has ceased to be the power of our region with the measures it has taken and has become one of the most powerful countries in the world, one of the countries at the table. Don’t be upset, don’t be sad. We are all after an ideal. The flag will not go down, the prayer will not be silent. Let them bang their heads against the wall” (T24,2022).

As can be clearly seen in Bahçeli’s statement above, the Nation Alliance is associated with terrorist organizations, and it is claimed that both political opposition parties and terrorist organizations are in cooperation with global foreign powers.

“We have neither an inch of land nor a single person to be given to the dishonest people whose value is 1 dollar. The conflict and betrayal bloc, consisting of CHP, İYİP, HDP, PKK, FETÖ, PYD, YPG, DAESH, DHKP-C and the global murder network, will scatter against the people and will have no choice but to lose. Our candidate in the presidential election is Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, after no adverse and accidental developments” (Politikyo1,2018).

The main subject of the internal enemy construction of the AKP-MHP alliance before the 2023 elections is the Nation Alliance and the table of six, and the two leaders call the alliance the “alliance of disgrace” (zillet ittifakı), thereby increasing polarization and hostility. MHP leader Bahçeli made one of the clearest examples of this exclusionary right-wing populist discourse at the party general assembly, while addressing the national alliance in cooperation with terrorist organizations, he also glorified the people’s alliance.

“Indeed, CHP, İYİP and other spare tires are in disgrace, in loss, in the grip of frustration. The People’s Alliance is essentially an alliance of morality and devotion. The People’s Alliance is an alliance that is the power of the future and the assurance of independence. Our past is clear, our present is known, the goals we want to achieve in the future are in our nation’s knowledge in detail..... This alliance (Nation Alliance) is common with terrorism and separatism. This alliance is in a red cap and hat with the Turks and the enemies of Türkiye” (AA,2022).

Again, Bahçeli criticized the Nation Alliance, which has not yet announced its presidential candidate when there is a short time left for the 2023 elections, and claimed that foreign powers, internal enemies and terrorist organizations had an effect on this uncertainty:

“Entrusting our Türkiye to political parties whose common purpose is to serve the aspirations of foreign powers, and which have not yet agreed on a common candidate, and which have been captured by the lobbies, is to disregard our future” (dokuz8haber:2022).

Based on the above statements of the People’s Alliance in partnership with Bahçeli and Erdoğan, in the politics of Türkiye, polarization and hardness are increasing, and in the next section of the study, the Nation Alliance and the rise of left-wing populism in response to this political atmosphere will be revealed.

3.The Rise of Left-Wing Populism in Türkiye: Nation Alliance

The alliance, which was established under the name of the nation alliance in the partnership of Good Party (İyi Parti-IYIP), İslamist Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi-SP), Democrat Party (DP) in 2018, has determined the basis of its policies and discourses against the government as the economy, and the inflation that the country has been in for the last two years is the main reason for this situation. Looking at the data of the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), while the monthly inflation was 11.10 and 48.69 percent on an annual basis in January 2022, it was determined as 84.39 percent on an annual basis and 2.88 percent on a monthly basis in November 2022 (TUIK,2022).

Therefore, in such a period when the people's livelihood is quite high, the opposition leaders, who thought that the government's flag and nation-themed discourses would not have a counterpart in the public, determined the basis of their political discourse. In this direction, the leaders of the nation alliance aim to consolidate the people in this regard by emphasizing the conditions experienced by the government and the privileged segments close to the government in almost every speech they make. CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu did not neglect to draw attention to this privilege of the government in his speech in a village in Edirne:

"We want to rule our country from the humble Çankaya. Our goal is this, I also told Erdogan. Wasting is forbidden, don't waste it. At least, a waste circular is issued. Isn't an airplane enough for you? You have more palaces than any Ottoman sultan has ever had. What will you do?" these palaces?

"Gentlemen, whiskey glasses in their hands, they will earn from tax-free interest. Farmers, tradesmen, industrialists, what is their sin? The other has no risk. I will give all that money to the nation" (T24:2022).

In fact, the first important test of these left populist policies of the Nation Alliance was given in the 2019 local elections, and the alliance achieved a remarkable success by winning a significant part of the metropolitan cities in Türkiye. If Ekrem İmamoğlu's performance in the Istanbul elections is considered in this context, it can be said that it received a positive response from the public. As underlined by Demiralp and Balta, İmamoğlu did not target Erdoğan's personality, authority, religious or ideological values during the election campaign, and displayed an embracing attitude among the people (Demiralp and Balta, 2021:11). In this context, İmamoğlu did not deal with any ideological or religious identity of the people, but, like the party leader of which he was a member, based on the economic problems of the people with a left-wing populist approach. Considering that Istanbul has been under AKP rule for 25 years, İmamoğlu emphasized how the money of the people was wasted by the privileged segment with his discourses.

"80 million lira was spent on the website of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (IMM) in 3 years. We can handle the websites of all municipalities in Türkiye with this money. A single directorate in IMM has given 226 million liras to unrealized idea projects. How important are these projects now... What a waste! Isn't it a pity for all this tossed money? Isn't it a pity for the taxes of Istanbul residents? We will change this waste system together. IMM is not the property of a handful of people. IMM will now work for the benefit of all Istanbul residents. Together, we will change the wasteful plundering system they have set up" (Birgün,2019).

In addition to all these economic-themed discourses, İmamoğlu has adopted an inclusive discourse and language, contrary to the AKP and Erdoğan's rhetoric and policies, which have become increasingly harsh and exclusionary after 2010, and won the elections with the slogan "Everything will be fine". Additionally, İmamoğlu made the political atmosphere polarized by AKP and Erdoğan for many years inclusive with the slogan "We are working for 16 million". Therefore, as emphasized by Şener vd., İmamoğlu's election campaign includes "a new construction of the people" and, unlike right-wing populism, treats the people as an inclusive whole, regardless of religion, language or race (Şener vd.,2022:135).

Although the People's Alliance won 51,6 percent of the votes in the 2019 local elections, the loss of metropolitan cities to the opposition and the loss of the AKP, which has ruled Istanbul and Ankara since the beginning of its rule, is also described as a Pyrrhic victory (Brookings,2019). In other words, the 2019 elections and the winning of the metropolitan cities other than Bursa and Gaziantep can be described as an important success for the Nation Alliance, as it was the first election in which the Nation Alliance implemented its left-wing populist strategy.

Adopting a left-wing populist strategy against the right-wing populist policies of the government and its partner MHP, the success of the Nation Alliance in the 2019 local elections is an important indicator, but it is not enough to overthrow the long-consolidated AKP government. Being aware of this reality, the Nation Alliance leaders sought to expand the alliance before the 2023 elections, and agreed with the Gelecek Party, which was founded under the leadership of former Prime Minister Davutoğlu, who left the AKP, and the DEVA party, which was founded under the leadership of former Finance Minister Babacan, and expanded with the name of the "table of six". The common goal of the table of six is to prepare a common manifesto for the transition to the parliamentary system planned to be established after the 2023 elections. In line with this goal, six leaders come together regularly and try to put forward a work for a strengthened parliamentary system (Esen,2022:3).

One of the most important points of the enlargement of the Nation Alliance in line with the goal of transition to the parliamentary system is that this enlargement includes not only the participation of the current opposition parties, but also the former AK Party members. In this regard, one of the most important figures of the left-wing populist discourse of the six-table is undoubtedly Babacan, the former Minister of Finance:

"We did good things between 2002-2015. I was at the head of the economy at that time. At that time, young people could go on short-term European tours with their pocket money. Retirees were able to save up their salaries and go on vacation abroad. A car could be bought with 12 months' salary of a civil servant. Buying a house and a car has become a dream for most of our citizens right now. Young people say, 'If I work for the rest of my life, I can neither have a house nor a car'"(Gazeteduvar:2023).

In addition to all these, Babacan also emphasizes the steps that need to be taken by targeting Erdogan and the AKP:

"We hope that we will come to power in the first election and solve this crisis. But every day they are in power, our job gets harder. Because the damage is growing, the hole in the economy is getting bigger. This is my call to Erdogan; If you want the country not to go bankrupt, if you want the country not to fall down from that pit, put an honest and qualified team at the head of the Central Bank and TUIK, then step away" (T24:2022).

In addition to all these left-wing populist strategies, one of the most important trump cards of the Nation Alliance, IYIP leader Meral Akşener, is "Meral Mother" as the people call her. So much so that Akşener, who draws a very impressive image on the opposition voters, establishes a close bond with the people and draws a clear distinction between the people and the elite. This distinction between the people and the elite, drawn by Akşener, is built on a purely economic basis and opposes the elite to the worker, farmer, retired, unemployed, in short; the economically disadvantaged segment of the society. Akşener, who portrays herself and the alliance she belongs to as the defender of this disadvantaged group, harshly criticizes Erdoğan and the AKP elites in her rhetorics.

It is clear that the Nation Alliance has a left-wing populist stance, considering the common goal of the Nation Alliance is the transition to a strengthened parliamentary system, it portrays an inclusive rather than exclusionary portrait of the electorate, and the opposition it draws between the economically disadvantaged majority and the privileged elite. The Nation Alliance, which started with the cooperation of four parties and expanded to include former AKP members before the 2023 elections, continues its left-wing populist policies, which achieved significant success in the 2019 local elections, without slowing down, in this context, unlike right-wing populism, without addressing the people on the basis of religion, ideology or identity, adopts economic-based discourses in an inclusive, not exclusionary, direction.

4.The Election: The Campaign Process And The Victory Of The People’s Alliance

After a long meeting on March 6, 2023, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu was announced as the candidate of the Nation Alliance. However, this announcement created some dissatisfaction within the National Alliance and among the electorate, and even during the pre-announcement negotiations, İYİP leader Akşener left the table, claiming that there was an “imposition” in the nomination process (NTV,2023). Arguing that the voter base wanted Yavaş and İmamoğlu, Akşener was called back to the table by the same two names, emphasizing that “the nation called him to duty”. Thereupon, a common formula was found and it was decided that İmamoğlu and Yavaş would be vice presidents (NTV,2023).

The election campaign, which officially started after the candidate announcements, took place in a highly polarizing atmosphere. While left populism and economic agenda gained weight in the rallies of the Nation Alliance, the main tool of the People’s Alliance was nationalism. So much so that, in one of the rallies he held, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan played an edited video recording depicting Kılıçdaroğlu with the PKK and conveyed to his voters that they should not support the terrorist organization (Euronews, 2023). The fact that İmamoğlu was attacked at the Erzurum rally shows that all this polarization policy has been met by the society.

At the end of this whole process, the election was not concluded in the first round held on May 14, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan received 49.54% of the votes and Kılıçdaroğlu received 44.89% of the votes. In the second round elections held on 28 May, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was elected as the 13th president with 52.16% of the votes (Euronews,2023).

With the election results creating a great shock for the Nation Alliance, various opinions have been put forward about how the people’s alliance won the election. According to Esen and Gumuscu, the most important element of victory is the charismatic authority of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Accordingly, instead of blaming their leaders for the economic conditions, the voters fully believe that the only person who will get them out of this situation is their leader, and this belief has won the election (Esen and Gümüşçü, 2023: 25). According to another analysis, another important reason that lost the election to the nation alliance is the unfairness of the election process and the competing conditions (Foreign Policy, 2023). Another important reason for the defeat is that, in line with the polls conducted in the voter base, no candidate selection was made and Kılıçdaroğlu’s election as the presidential candidate instead of İmamoğlu and Yavaş, the two favorite candidates of the voters.

5.Conclusion

The study aimed to investigate the extent to which left and right populism affect the Turkish political system on the basis of parties. In line with this aim, the findings reached in the study show that the AKP government’s rhetoric, domestic and foreign policies, and the nature of the us and them dichotomy adopted by the AKP government, albeit with ups and downs, is close to the right-wing populist line for 20 years since it seized power in 2002. Especially Erdoğan’s charismatic authority and success in mass mobilization enabled him to effectively incorporate right-wing populism into Turkish political life for many years. The 2019 local elections, on the other hand, are the period when the Turkish political system encounters some changes, and it appears as a period when left populism is on the rise in Türkiye. The 2019 local election has been an election in which the People’s Alliance proceeded with a right-wing populist ideology in terms of handling the us and them dichotomy in an ethno-religious-nationalist line and excluding all opposition parties, organizations and popular base. In the same election, the Nation Alliance adopted a left-wing populist ideology, and the economic crisis and high inflation environment that Türkiye has been in for a while were effective in this choice of ideology. The 2019 local elections held in this political conjuncture witnessed a “clash of alliances”, so to speak; The People’s Alliance with the Nation Alliance has come face to face for the first time. Although mathematically speaking, the winner of the 2019 local elections seems to be the People’s Alliance with 51.6 percent of votes, the loss of 7 metropolitan cities under the rule of the Nation Alliance, especially the loss of the capital Ankara and metropolitan Istanbul, can be described as a great loss for the People’s Alliance. From this point of view, the positive reaction of the people, especially in metropolitan areas, to the economic policies in the 2019 local elections, which was the first election built by the Nation Alliance on left populist politics and discourse, can be defined as a “limited” success of left-wing populism.

As a result, it can be seen that the two important alliances that emerged in the last period of Turkish Politics adopted different discourses during the election campaign before the 2023 General Elections. When the discourses of the party leaders and politicians throughout the process are examined, it is seen that the discourses of the People's Alliance led by Erdoğan and Bahçeli show a predominantly right-wing populist tendency, while left-wing populist discourses are dominant, as seen in the discourses of Kılıçdaroğlu, Akşener, Babacan and Davutoğlu.

The results of the 2023 presidential elections show that, despite the weight of the current economic conditions, the feelings of nationalism still predominate in Turkish politics. The campaign of the ruling alliance, which brought nationalism to the fore, received more response from the electorate. In this election, in which the charismatic authority's place for the Turkish voters is indisputably revealed, the biggest shortcoming of the opposition is that the wishes of the electorate base are ignored in the candidate selection. Although İmamoğlu and Yavaş, who have high credits in the eyes of the public, took an active role in the campaign process, the fact that Kılıçdaroğlu was the candidate pushed the voters to choose Erdoğan, who is more accepted as a charismatic leader. This election shows that right-wing populism has triumphed in Turkish politics for the time being and has defeated the opposition's left-wing populist arguments. However, the fact that the election result was determined by a small margin shows that the two axis of populism are still significantly polarized in Turkish politics.

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