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2018's 'Political System Change' and Its Impact on Party Politics in Türkiye

Abstract

The Republic of Türkiye was founded on Ottoman parliamentary tradition introduced in 1878. However, debates on system change have always been on the agenda. The Turkish political elite has occasionally presented proposals on the need to shift from a parliamentary to a presidential system. The times of political crises set a suitable ground for such favourable arguments. This article focuses primarily on the realisation of the system change witnessed under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's leadership. In the first part, it argues that the three-phase strategy of the AK Party has made its political dreams come true. An issue is first popularised, then narrativised, and finally securitised. Consequently, the new presidential government system was adopted with the April 16th, 2017 referendum. The article analyses how the system change has modified the formation of such alliances among the political parties beyond customary ways. It questions to what extent this novel dimension of party politics would be sustainable. The second part thus elaborates on the formation of alliances and the efforts to make them functional on the way to consensual politics. Lijphart's classification of democracies as majoritarian governments versus consensus governments has provided a theoretical base for a discussion on the return to a strengthened parliamentary system. The article sheds light on the new dynamics of government/opposition relations and their influence on Turkish democracy.

Keywords: Türkiye, Turkey, System Debate, Change, Presidential System, Party Politics, Democracy

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Introduction

The Republic of Türkiye was created upon Ottoman parliamentary tradition introduced in 1878. However, debates on system change have always been on the political agenda. The Turkish political elite has occasionally presented proposals on the need for a shift from a parliamentary to a presidential system. Popularising such proposals coincided with the times when the political elite needed to eliminate external pressures over civilian, democratic politics. The sporadic renewals of such enthusiasm for system change were still far from creating fertile ground for a fruitful discussion, and debates which were held did not provide informative nor critical accounts for the people.

This pattern vividly demonstrated itself again back in 2007 as an escalation of civil/military tension connected to the selection of the next president by the Parliament. The Justice and Development Party (AK Party) was the governing political party at that time, and its parliamentary majority was adequate for electing its candidate as President. It was terrifying for the secular republicans, i.e., the military, since they perceived the AK Party as an Islamist party. In response, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government put system change at the top of its political agenda, and, subsequently, a change in the system was made possible with an April 16th 2017 referendum. The details about the newly introduced system, dubbed a "presidential government system" (*cumhurbaşkanlığı hükümet sistemi*), were not clear at the beginning. The nature of the system has evolved in due course, and has been a politically contentious issue.

Partial, incomplete, and personalised analyses have turned the issue into a good example of antagonism. A new phase of confrontational politics has become a significant feature of contemporary Türkiye and, although the new presidential government system has been adopted with the constitutional changes introduced by the April 16th 2017 referendum, which entered into force in July 2018, it has had no reducing effect on the antagonism between the government and the opposition. Indeed, the result of the referendum worked quite to the contrary in that both sides closed ranks. New alliances around two main political blocs have formed, and this situation does not seem to be transitionary nor short-lived. This paper analyses the significance of 2018's 'political system change'[1] by

[1] Although the 2017 referendum introduced a transition to a presidential (government) system, I have intentionally used 'political system change' instead of 'governmental system change'. At first sight it may not seem in congruous with the terminology of political science. Instead of finding the appropriate usage, revealing the meanings attributed to the system change has been prioritised. It is quite striking that the proponents of the AK Party's presidential government model has opted

examining the discussions and developments before the 2017 referendum and by looking at what it has brought to the political arena. Thus, the first part looks at the debates on the constitutional amendments in the pre-referendum period, and how the influence of yes/no camps extended beyond the referendum and plays an essential role in creating political blocs as the new representations of party politics. The paper aims to firstly investigate how system change is realised, and secondly how it has modified the formation of such alliances among the political parties beyond customary ways. It questions to what extent this novel dimension of party politics is sustainable. The second part elaborates on the formation of alliances and the efforts to make them functional on the way to consensual politics. These two parts are germane to the discussion on the relationship between system change and the change in party politics. The way the change in the system was realised has intensified ongoing debates, deepened the rift among the government and opposition parties, and created new alliances out of growing political fragmentation. Examining the overall process with a focus on the continuities and changes of system debate before and after the 2017 referendum will shed light on the new dynamics of the government/opposition relations and their influence on Turkish democracy. Arend Lijphart's classification of democracies as majoritarian governments versus consensus governments will be useful in providing a theoretical base for a discussion on the return to a strengthened parliamentary system and its implications for the future of democracy in Türkiye (Lijphart, 2012).

for defining the change as a "transformation of the political system" (*siyasal sistemin dönüşümü*) (Miş, Duran, 2017). The new system is said to bring encompassing reforms and necessitate a novel political style. Thus, the change is more than mere institutional change (Alkan, 2018, p. 150). It is the reflection of a previously presented argument that Türkiye had a long-time (political) system problem requiring a shift from a bureaucratic republic to a democratic one that could be solved with encompassing state reform and a transition to a presidential system (Yayman, 2016, p. 315). The opponents of the presidential government system perceive the change not only within the institutional capacity of the presidency but as a threat to the democratic republic. The corrosive influence of the new system over all aspects of the country is highlighted on the website of Good Party (İYİ Party) (İYİ Parti, 2022). In a memorandum of understanding of the six political parties, the presidential government system is alleged to have brought "arbitrary and unlawful rule" paving the way to the deepest political and economic crises of the republic (*Güçlendirilmiş Parlamenter Sistem Mutabakat Metni*, 2022). The People's Democracy Party (HDP), the opposition party outside of any alliances, agrees with the opinion that the presidential government system is the source of multiple crises and argues that the new system aims to institutionalise and hence consolidate "arbitrariness and authoritarianism" (Euronews, 2021).

Towards System Change

The desire to change the system of government from that of parliamentary to presidential has occasionally been voiced by political elites as a remedy to overcome the difficulties faced in times of political crisis. This could be due to a failure to form an effective single-party government and being forced to set up short-lived coalitions or because of a stalemate caused by the Parliament not electing a president (Gülener, 2016, p. 110). Political leaders even blamed the parliamentary system in Türkiye for keeping a tight grip on executive will and hindering political reform (Çağlıyan İçener, 2015, p. 316). The 1982 Constitution, as a follow-up of the 1980 military coup, had indeed exacerbated the issue with its dual executive structure with an active and politically irresponsible president having discretionary powers. Some scholars argue that the post-1980 coup system could therefore be named as *parliamentarism attenué* (weakened parliamentarism) (Özbudun, 2000, p. 60). There have been individual initiatives to solve the problems stemming from this weakness since the late 1980s, although none of these could be realised until the April 2017 referendum. The AK Party under Erdoğan succeeded in dominating system-related debate and bringing about system change.

The strategic manoeuvre of the AK Party on the path towards system change can better be understood if we deal with it in three progressive and interrelated phases. Firstly, the issue of system change is popularised, then narrativised, and finally securitised by the AK Party. These three steps have promoted, facilitated, and catalysed the shift toward a system that had no definite label nor clear content at the beginning. The three-phased analysis below is significant in grasping the increasing trend of political polarisation and the rise of bloc politics.

The Popularisation of the Issue of System Change

The popularisation of the issue of system change can be traced back to 2007, when the then President Ahmet Necdet Sezer was about to finish his term of office. Before being proposed as a joint candidate of major political parties in the Parliament, Sezer had served as the President of the Constitutional Court and become widely acclaimed as a man of law and justice. There were no doubts about his loyalty to the Republic's secular character. On the other hand, the November 2002 general elections triggered a significant change in Turkish politics. As a result of the elections, the political parties of the 1990s that had been deemed responsible for an economic recession and political crises were kicked out of Parliament. Beyond all expectations, the AK Party gained the highest vote in the parliamentary

elections with the support of an electorate alienated by the unsuccessful policies of centrist political parties. Only the Republican People's Party (CHP) managed to gain seats in the Parliament as the opposition of a two-party Parliament.

The religious/secular divide was still effective at that time.[2] Yet the novel discourse of the AK Party leaned on a unifying and constructive language. Until 2007, AK party leaders tried to build a prudent and moderate outlook and consciously refrained from entering into conflict with the secular groups. The discussions on who would be the next president changed the course of events. Despite its efforts both in words and deeds to disassociate itself from its National Outlook (*Milli Görüş*) past (one in which it had an Islamist orientation), the AK Party continued to be perceived as a threat to the secular regime. Nevertheless, the party had a sufficient majority to make its candidate the 11th president of the Republic. The terrified secularists started a campaign to eliminate any possible candidate of the AK Party, especially the candidates married to headscarfed women among whom Erdoğan was the frontrunner candidate.

The AK Party went on to announce Abdullah Gül as its presidential candidate. Gül was one of the four founding figures of the party who had been among the young generation of the Welfare Party (RP) that challenged the one-man domination of Necmettin Erbakan. In the first round of the elections at the Parliament, Gül received 357 votes out of 361 participant deputies. Although no similar argument was suggested and implemented in the preceding presidential elections, the Constitutional Court ruled that the number of participants to the election session should not be under 367; hence, the first round was annulled.[3] This notorious 367 decision led party notables to look for a remedy to avoid any outside intrusion into the fulfilment of national will. The AK Party proposed

[2] The impact of religiosity in voting behaviour was indicated by various studies (Çarkoğlu, 2007; Kalaycıoğlu, 2012). Based on these, Esen and Gümüşçü draw attention to the situation that religious conservative voters in low-income neighbourhoods supported the AK Party whereas middle-class secularists in coastal areas and major cities voted for the CHP (Esen, Gümüşçü, 2017, p. 310).

[3] The CHP did not propose any candidate in the 2007 presidential rally. The party chose not to participate in the first round of elections and appealed to the Constitutional Court as the main opposition party for the annulment of the election. The other minor parties which had a smaller number of deputies, i.e., the Motherland Party (ANAP) and the True Path Party (DYP) also declared that they would not enter the General Assembly during the election session. In spite of the decision of these centre-right parties, 2 deputies each from the DYP and the ANAP participated in the session. But still this is important to trace back to the situational alliance of the CHP and the centre-right parties for the common purpose of protecting the republican establishment against the AK Party.

constitutional amendments to elect a President by popular vote, and the Parliament accepted them. Yet the then President Sezer did not approve of the amendments and vetoed the proposal. In accordance with the constitution, if the majority of the deputies accept the proposal as it is and send it back to the president, he can then take the issue to a referendum. President Sezer followed this procedure, and a referendum was scheduled for October 21st, 2007.

Sezer was not alone in the struggle to eliminate the AK Party's potential presidential candidates. The army reacted to mounting political tension with the April 27th e- memorandum. The generals were still under the influence of the military's self-assumed role of being the guardians of the secular, republican regime and the mentality of seeing the February 28th process as being necessary to continue until the reactionary threat would be overcome. Unlike previous military interventions, especially the February 28th post-modern coup, the army seemed to be less assertive and more cautious this time. The preference on the timing of the e-memorandum was remarkable. Many commented that it was a midnight intervention to eliminate any negative impact on the financial markets. The generals were prudent enough not to be held responsible for any negative outcomes by the government. The response of the political elites to this military interference was exceptionally different. The AK Party's firm stance against such external pressure on politics had significant implications for the party and Turkish democracy. The quick reaction of the then party spokesman Cemil Çiçek directly addressing the military was considered heroic and one which tipped the scales in favour of the AK Party. This reaction started to build the moral superiority of the party in the eyes of many. Hence, the April 27th e-memorandum paved the way for the popularisation of the argument presenting the parliamentary system of government with the applied instruments in Türkiye as an obstacle to the realisation of the democratic will of the people. The elected civilian executive was under the pressure of a tutelary regime.

Before the referendum, the July 22nd general elections had been held. The AK Party increased its vote-based support by about 12%. The result was proof of Erdoğan's powers of persuasion over the electorate in his fight against tutelage. The AK Party succeeded in widening its electorate and getting Gül elected as the 11th President by the new Parliament. The Nationalist Action Party (MHP) deputies participated in the third round of the session. The MHP had its presidential candidate and it did not ally with the CHP in its resort to embracing the idea of the formula of a required 367 participant deputies. Instead, it indirectly played a faciliatory role in the election of Gül. This position, along with the MHP's generous

support for the AK Party to adopt constitutional changes, required to shift to a presidential system later in 2016 can be considered the seeds of the current People's (*Cumhur)* alliance. The AK Party vociferously articulated the idea to change the system of government from a parliamentary to a presidential one in this political atmosphere. In fact, this prompted many people to appraise the meaning of such a system change widely. This culminated in the result of the October 21st referendum wherein 69.1% of voters accepted electing the President by popular vote. It shows the extent of the AK Party's success in popularising system change. No political actor before had had that chance and capacity to open the discussion with such concrete support. Erdoğan managed to familiarise the concept of system change and attracted the masses' attention to its vitality and inevitability. This is a significant first step towards realising system change in government.

The Narrativisation of the Issue of System Change

Although the 2007 referendum constitutionalised the president's election by popular vote, it did complicate the process. There were arguments that constitutional changes may pave the way to legal uncertainty on some issues. The first discussion was about Gül's presidential term. Since presidential terms are limited to five years with the possibility of re-election for a second five-year term, in the minds of some, Gül's term should have ended in 2012. Others argued that the Parliament elected him before the constitutional changes had taken effect, hence his term would end in 2014.

From 2007 onwards, the AK Party continued to argue publicly that changing the system to a presidential one was necessary. Additionally, creating a new constitution was put on top of its agenda. Yet changing the system from a parliamentary to a presidential model would not be easy. Popularising the issue was a good start, but somewhat insufficient to realise change. Those voting in favour of a popularly-elected president in the referendum were loosely tied to the issue as part of an emotional and context-bounded reaction. The critical challenge is to assist people in making sense of what is happening and guide their actions in a certain way by creating a limited repertoire of competing narratives. Having the upper hand over the opponents of a more extensive change of government system could be possible through narrativising the issue. This process includes, on one side, mostly bad and worrisome memories of the past and, on the other, mostly good and desirable expectations about the future. If this dual strategy functions well, then a dominant narrative could

be formulated. Telling past stories about the tutelary understanding that inhibited the fulfilment of national will, the dual executive, and troubled coalition periods which ended up with political instability and the crisis of government are important for the negative component of narrativising. Conversely, boosting high morale for a better projection is the positive component. This was done by depicting a well-functioning and effective government under the President as the sole, executive figure. Stability, faster decision-making, and a powerful state have become the frequently-stated terms in this narrativisation process (Esen, Gümüşçü, 2017).

After the 2011 parliamentary elections, the Constitution Conciliation Commission was formed in the Parliament. It comprised three representatives from each political party, and the commission held the meetings for two years. Shifting to a presidential system of government was a central issue of the new constitution for the governing AK Party. The main opposition party in the form of the CHP objected to that proposal and insisted on strengthening the parliamentary system. From the very beginning, the two opposing sides approached their proposals within the brackets not of a system of government, but a regime change. The conciliation commission's two years of work was not enough to reach an agreement on the principles of a new constitution. And so, the commission was dissolved in 2013.

The August 10th 2014 presidential election went on to become a historic election. It marked the beginning of a new era of the first popularly-elected Turkish president. The two main opposition parties of that period, the CHP and MHP, agreed to name the former President of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu as their joint presidential candidate. The other powerful opposition party, the HDP, proposed its leader Selahattin Demirtaş as its candidate. It is essential to follow the efforts of the opposition parties, mainly the former two, to find a unifying name against Erdoğan. The MHP's strong criticism of and fierce opposition towards Erdoğan completely reversed within two years. Surprisingly, the MHP led the process of changing the system. It triggered the AK Party's move to constitutionalise the change with a referendum. In that sense, arguing that Erdoğan's presidential term marked the beginning of an irreversible process towards system change helped narrativise the issue.

The Securitisation of the Issue of System Change

The first two phases, popularisation and narrativisation, promoted and facilitated the system change. Yet obviously, without the third phase, namely, the securitisation of the issue, the shift to a presidential government system would not be fully achieved. The result of the June

2015 parliamentary elections was alarming for the AK Party; it was the first time since 2002 that they did not reach the required majority in the Parliament to set up a single-party government. The bilateral meetings between the AK Party and the other opposition parties (the CHP, MHP, and Felicity Party (SP) respectively) bore no results. Due to the failure of establishing a coalition government, in his constitutional capacity, President Erdoğan announced his decision to take the country to snap elections. The Supreme Election Council (YSK) ruled for holding the snap elections on November 1st, 2015. The result of the elections was a relief for the AK Party. Once again, it reached a sufficient number of seats in the Parliament to continue its single-party rule. That said, this was the beginning of a new period. The AK Party associates encountered the actuality that the tide may quickly turn.

The July 15th, 2016 failed coup attempt has become an important milestone in returning to the notorious securitising discourses of the old Turkey that the AK Party, under Erdoğan's leadership, claimed to counteract since the establishment of the party. This was not synthetic and groundless, though. Indeed, it was not the first time that an elected government had become a target to be toppled by non-elected state elites in Turkish political history. However, what made the July 15th incident unprecedented was its actors' allegiance to a religious cleric by the name of Fethullah Gülen under the guise of army officers who had the prevailing reputation of being guards of the secular republican regime. This duplicitous nature was quite surprising but not as much as the putschist army officers' ordering the Turkish soldiers to bomb their Parliament, interior ministry, and police headquarters pitilessly, taking their chief of general staff hostage and opening fire on their fellow, unarmed citizens. It was an assault not only on President Erdoğan and the governing AK Party, but on Türkiye as a state, its institutions, and people. That said, the infiltration of Gülenists into the army was only the tip of the iceberg. The July 15th failed coup attempt revealed the extent of the danger targeting the Turkish state. An octopus-like structure in the form of the Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation (FETÖ) has manifested itself not only in state institutions such as the military, bureaucracy, the judiciary, security forces, and the education sector but also in the media, commercial activities, the banking system, and civil societal mechanisms such as business associations and NGOs. This has become the real challenge for the government to continue combating the FETÖ menace after the successful, popular resistance thwarted the putsch. The level of parallel state structuring necessitated tight measures and large-scale purges from state posts. Therein lies the rationale behind the return to securitisation.

The ultimate aim of the heinous coup attempt was the elimination of Erdoğan. Although he, at that time, was on holiday in Marmaris and in a hotel with his family, Erdoğan reached the masses rapidly and rallied them to thwart the coup plotters on the very same night. The people's resistance was heroic. For the first time in Turkish history, people neither remained indifferent nor idle to the intervention, nor did they hesitate to martyr themselves to protect the nation's will and democratic state. The post-July 15th pro-democracy vigils of Turkish people continued for 27 days in 81 provinces. These were popular manifestations of a widespread embracing of democracy as an essential principle and loyalty to the democratic regime. It should be noted that these vigils did not only include AK Party supporters.

The inclusive nature of the democracy vigils is essential so as to grasp the follow-up process it initiated, reminding the politicians of the significance of moderation, conciliation, and consensus (Çağlıyan İçener, 2016, p. 122). This desire culminated in the Yenikapı meeting, the biggest meeting ever in Türkiye, with the participation of the governing AK Party and two main opposition parties, the CHP and MHP, on August 7th, 2016. It had an importance beyond symbolism. This growing enthusiasm of the people served to suppress the polarising discourses of the political parties that had dominated the political arena before July 15th. It could have been "a historic opportunity for creating a plural and democratic New Turkey" (Çağlıyan İçener, 2016, p. 124) had consensual politics supplemented the conflict-driven, polarising style of politics. Unfortunately, the Yenikapı spirit in politics did not last particularly long. The declaration of a state of emergency cast doubts about the sincerity of the AK Party's allegiance to steer Türkiye towards being an 'advanced democracy'. The shift towards ruling the country with presidential decrees has been used to substantiate the arguments that the political system in Türkiye continues its drift towards authoritarianism.[4] Erdoğan was depicted, by the opposing elites, as a man who was consolidating his one-man rule benefiting from the bringing-the-state's-security-back-in approach. For them, Erdoğan's *de facto* presidentialism has emerged as the most crucial obstacle to Turkish democracy. The MHP, which has long been an advocate of a presidential system, came to the scene and pushed the AK Party to shift the system

[4] The authoritarian turn of the AK Party's rule has become one of the major themes discussed in academic circles since 2009 onwards. Various definitions are used: "electoral authoritarianism" and "democratic backsliding" (Özbudun, 2014), "rising authoritarianism" (Öniş, 2015), "competitive authoritarianism" (Özbudun, 2015; Kalaycıoğlu, 2015; Sayarı, 2016; Esen, Gümüşçü, 2016; 2018), and "authoritarian retreat" (Esen, Gümüşçü, 2016).

from a *de facto* presidentialism to *de jure* presidentialism with the promise of supporting a draft of constitutional amendments in Parliament. This could be considered the beginning of the ongoing alliance between the AK Party and the MHP. The number of deputies of the two parties was insufficient to realise change through the parliamentary mechanism. Still, the result cleared the way for a referendum. The April 2017 referendum was held under this atmosphere wherein the securitising language patronised the debates of the two coalition camps. The 'yes' camp (*Cumhur İttifakı*) labelled the 'no' camp (*Millet ittifakı*) as an alliance of contempt (*zillet ittifakı)*. In the eyes of the former, the latter was collaborating with the 'enemies' of the nation and that was a matter of the state's survival (Esen, Gümüşçü, 2019, p. 324). There was a continuation of the state of emergency declared after the 2016 failed coup attempt. This strengthened Erdoğan's hand in creating 'a false sense of urgency' for augmenting the powers of the president so as to return to political stability (Çınar, 2021, p. 320).

Party Politics in a Presidential Government System

A History of Coalition Formation in Türkiye

It is a well-known practice in Turkish parliamentary politics to establish coalition governments when the number of seats of an individual political party in the Parliament is not enough to set up a single-party government after an election. Votes of confidence and the 10% national threshold are also among the difficulties the political parties have experienced in coalition formation in the parliamentary system. These mechanisms could negatively influence the formation process or the survival of coalition governments.

Political fronts are other types of coalition-like formations observed in certain periods of Turkish politics. Unlike the connotation that 'coalition' as a term evoked, the word 'front' is mainly associated with the word 'polarization' in the Turkish people's political lexicon. The *Vatan* Front of the late 1950s was a primary and decisive demonstration of such usage. It became an ideological move of a political party in government (the Democrat Party – (DP)), targeting the opposition and the particular segments of the social coalition that had taken the party to government before but later severed its ties at a faster pace. Hence it was argued to be implemented by the DP's leadership as a tool for political polarisation (Kahraman, 2010, p. 334). Another famous political front was the two Nationalist Front governments of the second half of the 1970s. It reflected the ideological polarisation of the era on the continuum of communism

and anti-communism. The fragmented structure of the Parliament made it difficult to form a stable government. The ideological polarisation also increased the political tension and therefore decreased the probability of cooperation among the political parties enjoying stronger electoral support. The absence of motivation for and experience in forming coalition governments prioritising cooperation and the conciliation of differences is directly linked with the dominance of the majoritarian democracy understanding in Turkish political culture. Hence what was seen in the 1970s were unstable, fragile, short-term coalition governments as conjectural formations.

In Turkish political memory, the 1970s and 1990s are the signifiers of the idea of coalition. However, the first coalition government was formed just after the 1960 military coup. Tracing back to the roots of coalition formation is vital to follow the trajectory of the understanding of democracy in Türkiye. The forerunners of coalition governments were set up under the premiership of İsmet İnönü as the leader of the CHP in the post-1960 coup era. The CHP and the Justice Party (AP), established after the coup and which quickly gained a reputation as an heir to the DP, agreed on a coalition protocol and twice received a vote of confidence in the Parliament. The first iteration ruled between 20.11.1961 and 25.06.1962 and the second between 25.06.1962 and 25.12.1963. The military's relatively quick transfer of political power to civilians after the restoration of the democratic regime opened a new era with many changes in the system. The simple plurality system with multi-member constituencies by party lists was replaced with a d'Hondt version of proportional representation system. The objective was to avoid a single-party government in a system without separation of powers nor a functioning checks and balance mechanism as observed during the DP government. The October 15th general elections in 1961 were the first time the proportional representation system was introduced. As a result, none of the political parties received the required majority to form a government. The CHP-AP coalition government was formed to overcome this situation. Instead of the word *koalisyon* (borrowed from French and which became the term used to this day), the newly-formed government was named a "mixed government" (*karma hükümet*) in this first-time usage.

How this new political formation was presented could give us a idea about the conception of the coalition as a phenomenon in Turkish democracy. The then Prime Minister İnönü, in his speech in the National Assembly (TBMM) while introducing the government program, drew attention to the brand new nature of the coalition government in the Turkish political system. He presented it as an example of political maturity, an outcome

of a common belief in the necessity of replacing political enmity with a civilised political style and a means of a democratic regime (Neziroğlu, Yılmaz, 2015, p. 6). This was an excellent commencement on the way to building up the concept of the coalition. Unfortunately, it did not root itself in line with this content in the follow-up perceptions and applications regarding coalition formation. In fact, it is possible to associate this situation with the Turkish party system's long-time suffering from the three maladies known as fragmentation, polarisation, and volatility (Özbudun, 2000, p. 74).

The beginning of the series of coalition governments in the 1970s was an anomaly. President Fahri Korutürk assigned the duty of forming a government to Senator Naim Talu. The AP, the Republican Reliance Party (CGP), and independent deputies set up a coalition government (15.04.1973–26.01.1974) that was entitled to take the country to the new elections. The government was not born out of the will of the people, but was rather a by-product of the 1971 military intervention. Subsequently, the Talu government emerged as a deviation from coalition understanding in democratic regimes. It was engineered for a particular purpose, and therefore there was no motivation behind the formation of a coalition for conciliation and cooperation among coalition partners.

Another distinctive example of coalition formation presented itself in the 10-month long coalition government of Ecevit's leftist CHP and Erbakan's Islamic-oriented National Salvation Party (MSP). This was an unexpected move due to the polarised nature of the era limiting the actors' preferences and activities from the dimension of left/right discourse. The determinants of the left/right spectrum in Türkiye never resembled the European equivalent focusing on economic policies more as the decisive factor. Instead, religion was given an essential place in defining what the left and right was in Türkiye. Thus, although the CHP and the MSP had shared a similar anti-imperialist stance, the ideological distance between the two political parties was said to be so large that it was a great surprise to see them under the same roof of a coalition government. Yet that coalition experience was a step toward overcoming this perception. It was valued for its potential for opening a new and pleasant era for the Turkish people in the coalition protocol (Neziroğlu, Yılmaz, 2015, p. 591). Ecevit, as the prime minister, in a speech delivered to the Parliament, suggested that this coalition period would be an era of tranquillity where differing views were discussed and coexisted peacefully (Neziroğlu, Yılmaz, 2015, p. 593). Social justice and societal peace were referred to as two shared principles of the coalition partners. It is striking that differences are mentioned more than commonalities. How they

approach coalitions was stated in the coalition protocol. It was emphasised that forming coalitions among the political parties necessitates certain concessions in that each political party should abandon some of its views and policies. This meant that no one should expect the CHP and the MSP to fully implement their party programs during the coalition government period (Neziroğlu, Yılmaz, 2015, p. 580).

The Nationalist Front coalition governments succeeded the CHP-AP coalition government in the second half of the 1970s. The new 1982 Constitution brought dramatic changes to the system. All political parties were outlawed, and their leaders were arrested. New political parties were required to get the military regime's approval to be opened. The parliamentary system was weakened to benefit the President with discretionary appointive powers. The 10% election threshold was introduced to eliminate the instability of coalition governments. Until the 1990s, a military-backed interim government (1980–1983), and then a single-party ANAP government ruled the country. However, within 10 years, coalition governments returned to Turkish politics. Throughout the 1990s, seven coalition governments were formed and not one of them lasted more than two years. This was more than the number of coalition governments (four in total) set up in the 1970s. Governmental instability, combined with other severe economic and social problems, exacerbated the political situation in the 1990s. That is why coalitions are still equated to past periods of terror, financial crises, corruption, and incompetence. The revival of debates on system change in the 2000s brought back these memories. And as stated above, the AK Party refreshed these memories in the minds of the people to narrativise the issue.

Political Parties, Bloc Politics, and System Debate in Today's Türkiye

In contemporary Türkiye, coalition governments are no longer an option under the presidential government system. For the proponents of the presidential system, this is a desired outcome of the system change. Coalitions are said to be the reason behind weakness and instability (Kuzu, 2011, p. 85). In the new system, the candidate receiving the absolute majority of the votes shall be elected President. The plurality systems have generally led to two-party systems. In this early period of change, it did not cause a decrease in the numbers of the political parties in Türkiye. Instead, the outcome was the formation of blocs. Forming new political parties continues to be popular, with the idea and ideal of changing the system towards a strengthened parliamentary system currently at the centre of political debate. Indeed, it is the fundamental issue behind rising

bloc politics. The hope for immediate change is shaping relations among the opposition parties. The polarising language of politics has long been a feature of government/opposition relations in Türkiye. So far, polarisation has worked for the benefit of the AK Party. However, a novel feature has established itself in intra-opposition relations. The unification factor has become the aim of changing the system again. Hence, unlike the previous short-term and fragile coalitions, the six opposition parties eagerly sit together around the table for a common purpose.

The predecessor of this situation was the emergence of two alliance formations resembling blocs. Alliances concretely manifested themselves after Erdoğan was popularly elected the President. The system needs to be modified to overcome the ambiguous position of such a powerful and partisan president. The AK Party needed arithmetic support for constitutional change, and the MHP was ready to provide it for the sake of introducing a presidential system. The latter wanted to steer government policies towards a more nationalist and statist leaning. Two parties allied and called themselves People's (*Cumhur)* Alliance. (In Turkish, *cumhur* means people. The words *cumhuriyet* (republic) and *cumhurbaşkanı* (President – the leader of the people) are derived from the word *cumhur*). Some of the opponents of system change came together and decided to close ranks before the 2018 general election. This alliance's founding political parties are the CHP, the İYİ Party, the SP, and the Democrat Party (DP). They chose the name *Millet* (nation) for their alliance rival to *Cumhur.* The deputies in the new system are elected by a proportional representation with a 7% threshold. Thus, to become effective in the legislative mechanism *vis-à-vis* the all-powerful executive under the president's leadership, that kind of cooperation is vitally important for the four opposition parties stated above. Even though coalitions are eliminated as desired in the presidential government system, blocs have replaced them. Compared to the loosely organised, temporary, and unstable structures of coalitions, blocs are more dedicated to collaborating for a relatively long time and focusing on the common shared goals of prioritising conciliation and consensus.

Alliances among political parties are put into practice from time to time. Small parties deemed it necessary to ally with others in the post-1980 era to overcome the injustice of representation resulting from the 10% threshold. In that sense, these alliances were temporary and pragmatic. Setting this aside, the political parties resorted to forming alliances with various social groups, i.e., intellectuals, bureaucrats, the bourgeoisie, and working class to extend their electorate (Kahraman, 2010, p. 334–336).

The short-term motivations of People's and Nation's alliances fit into the above examples. Yet, in such a polarised political atmosphere where

system debate dominated the agenda, the bloc politics emerged as a feature of this new system. Bloc politics mainly indicate "a bloc of left/right wing parties using its parliamentary majority to pass legislation without broad support in parliament" (Green-Pedersen, Thomsen, 2005, p. 154). In Türkiye, leftist/rightist political parties cannot be easily classified unlike in other European countries in terms of the approaches to socioeconomic issues. What we therefore see in contemporary Turkish politics in bloc formation is beyond the left/right divide.[5] As opposed to the People's alliance, another formation evolved starting from February 28th 2022. Labelled as the "Table for Six" (*altılı masa*), the CHP, the İYİ Party, the Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA), the SP, the Future Party (GP), and the DP signed a memorandum of agreement on system change favouring a strengthened parliamentary system. Since it came to power in 2002, the AK Party has swept away all the political actors who once dominated centre politics. This is a move towards empowering the centre of politics. It is welcomed as an antidote to the current polarisation in politics.

The religious/secular divide of the late 1990s triggered the rise of the AK Party to its potential to curb the effects of polarising discourse. The people were fed up with the confrontational and conflict-ridden political lexicon and quickly valued the unifying, conciliatory language of the AK Party. Gaining the upper hand over the old style of politics, the AK Party preserved a steady increase in electoral success until 2018. However, from 2007, the AK party gradually abandoned the conciliatory style. Particularly, July 15th, 2016 brought a security dimension more than ever to Erdoğan's policies. The AK Party were faced with a dilemma: to continue mobilising its electoral base with the help of controversial issues for not losing its entrenched support in the election periods, or to reinstate a conciliatory tone to lower the mounting tension that once became the party's distinctive character and made it a true success story. Going with the first option has resulted in disengagement and splits from the AK party. The establishment of DEVA and the GP can exemplify this trend. They were among the actors longing for the AK Party's unifying discourse. As later, being a partner of the Table for Six, the two parties mentioned above realised that only a joint initiative could increase the possibility of playing a remarkable role in changing the system.

Lijphart's classification of democracies in a majoritarian-consensual continuum can be useful in examining how democracy is conceived in Türkiye and its reflection over recent debates. Analysing system debate by referring to these two contrasting models may even inspire future

[5] It is also referred to as a democratic-authoritarian cleavage (Schafer, 2022, p. 19).

prospects for Turkish democracy. Lijphart starts his analysis with a definition of democracy as "government by and for the people" (Lijphart, 2012, p. 1). He further suggests that this definition brings about a dilemma; "Who will do the governing and to whose interests should the government be responsive when the people are in disagreement and have divergent preferences?" (Lijphart, 2012, p. 2). One possible answer is the majority of the people who, as Lijphart underlines, are "the essence of the majoritarian model of democracy". "The crux of the consensus model", on the other hand, lies in the answer "as many people as possible" (Lijphart, 2012, p. 2). Majority rule is required, but not considered satisfactory in this model. The consensus model aims to ensure broad participation in government and broad agreement on government policies.

Lijphart suggests two critical differences between these two models. One of them is about the locus of power. The majoritarian model demonstrates "the concentration of power in the hands of the majority". Conversely, the consensus model is interested in the "sharing, limiting or dispersal of power" (Lijphart, 2012, p. 2). The second difference is about the closely-related concepts with the models. The majoritarian model can be identified as exclusive, adversarial, and competitive, whereas inclusiveness, bargaining, and compromising are valued in the consensus model (Lijphart, 2012, p. 2). Lijphart looks at different variables as part of a two-dimensional pattern. One is "the executives-parties dimension", and the other is "the federal-unity dimension". Institutional differences matter at this point. Relevant to change in the institutional capacity of countries, Lijphart puts forward that proportional representation in a parliamentary system of government may fuel fears of creating "weak and unstable cabinets and ineffective policy-making" (Lijphart, 2012, p. 298). Actually, what matters more for Lijphart is the fine-tuning of parliamentarism and proportional representation. Another critical point Lijphart draws attention to is the two-way relationship between consensual political culture and consensual institutions. As he argues, a consensual culture may increase the likelihood of adopting consensus institutions. Yet, these institutions may influence culture. For example, suppose a particular culture is adversarial in its nature; in that case, consensus institutions may play a role in turning it into a less adversarial and more consensual culture (Lijphart, 2012, p. 301). Lijphart concludes that the support of the consensual political culture is essential for consensus democracy to flourish (Lijphart, 2012, p. 3).

The relatively unavailing efforts of coalition formation in Turkish politics have been analysed above. To reiterate, although the combination of parliamentary government and proportional representation were in use

until the system changed in 2018, the very high 10% threshold created a problem in ensuring fair representation. Hence, no pattern coming close to the consensus government model has ever been observed in the majoritarian-consensual continuum. The impact of a dominant majoritarian understanding of democracy and a lack of consensual political culture is also significant in the Turkish context.[6] Recently, as part of system debate, the support for shifting to a strengthened parliamentary system is growing among the people complaining about the Erdoğan government's performance. The Table for Six embodies this tendency in the political arena. The six political parties affirm that they prioritise bringing the concepts of consultation, negotiation, and conciliation back to a now polarised political atmosphere (*Güçlendirilmiş Parlamenter Sistem Mutabakat Metni*, 2022). This has always been an example of a type of discourse that has the potential to appeal a large audience.

On the other hand, there are serious challenges the Table for Six has faced and will face. The biggest threat to its existence would be the presidential elections in the very near future. The issue of agreeing on a joint candidate risks the functionality and sustainability of the Table for Six. Another factor would be the Kurdish issue and the relationship of the Table for Six with one of the other opposition parties in the form of the HDP. The HDP has a significant electoral base. There is, however, no consensus on how to approach this issue among the six parties. Besides these differences, their commitment to system change would be the most important motivation to continue this common platform. The plan for shifting to a strengthened parliamentary system and the way it would be practiced can provide a significantly potent experience for reminding us of the constructive dimension of moderation and conciliation in politics. Putting this into words, the memorandum of understanding signed by the participants of the Table for Six has emphasised that they are suggesting a system of parliamentary government different from the older version. Referring to plural, participatory, and deliberative democracy, grounding this new model on the rule of law and separation of powers, and empowering democratic politics through achieving fair representation and political stability are highlighted as essential pillars of this novelty. The electoral threshold is promised to be decreased to 3% (*Güçlendirilmiş Parlamenter Sistem Mutabakat Metni*, 2022). This new model has the potential to be very meaningful for Turkish democracy if only it does not mean a return to the practice of the same old parliamentary system in deeds as well.

[6] For an extensive discussion on the absence/weaknesses of consensus-based mechanisms and relations in Turkish politics, see (McLaren, Cop, 2011; Somer, 2014; 2016).

Conclusions

The system of government in Türkiye shifted from a parliamentary model to a presidential model with the 2017 referendum. However, debate on the system has raged on. Indeed, the system's change is perceived as more than a mere change of the governmental system. For both the proponents and the opponents of the change, it has an encompassing content influencing the nature of the democratic regime. The former presented it as a move towards an 'advanced democracy' while the latter as a move towards authoritarian rule. As these views are stark contrasts of each other, the issue of system change has continued to be a source of polarisation in Türkiye.

The 1982 Constitution of the military coup weakened parliamentarism by strengthening the President's executive capacity at the expense of the Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers. The lack of trust in elected political elites by the military regime was behind the logic of creating a strong and active President who was made politically non-liable at the same time. The office of presidency was designed as the locus of a secular state and the safety valve of the republican regime. The President was set to be elected by the parliamentary majority guaranteeing his above-politics status. The President's already-strengthened role within the system led to crises for different circles in different circumstances. The considerable executive powers of the President from time to time put some obstacles in front of political elites, as seen in Ahmet Necdet Sezer's presidential term. On another occasion, when a political party, if it was particularly perceived as a threat to secular regime, had the majority in the Parliament sufficient to elect its presidential candidate then, it created a crisis again, as seen in the political developments following the declaration of Abdullah Gül's presidential candidacy by the AK Party. Hence it is clear that change is inevitable. It is not a matter of *if*, but *when* and *how*.

Starting from the 1970s, shifting to a presidential model was occasionally proposed by the political elites. The times of political crises set suitable ground for such favourable arguments. Thus, there are many studies on the history of controversies over system change in Türkiye. It is mainly analysed from the perspectives of constitutional law or comparative politics. Studying political leaders and/or political parties proposing a shift to a presidential system in Türkiye is a common theme. Other studies concentrate on the appropriateness of presidentialism for Türkiye and the positive/negative scenarios regarding the system change.

This article focuses mainly on the realisation of the system change under Erdoğan's leadership. It argues that the three-phase strategy of the

AK Party has made its political dreams come true. An issue is first popularised, then narrativised, and finally securitised. The previous system-change proposals managed to complete the first phase. The issue could be popularised in other instances to some extent thanks to crises. However, the other phases did not succeed the phase of popularisation in the past. The process then did not go anywhere. It has become a political achievement of Erdoğan and his party to combine the popularisation of the issue of system change with the other two successive phases. The starting point was the 2007 presidential election. Gül's candidacy, the April 27th e-memorandum, and the 367 decision were critical events in terms of creating emotional and context-bound reactions of the people. This eased the process of popularisation. Formulating a dominant narrative was the second phase which was comparatively difficult. The dual strategy of bringing up bad memories and boosting morale with good expectations about the future helped the AK Party fulfil this task. Erdoğan became the first popularly-elected Turkish president ever in the 2014 presidential election. Thus, it marked the beginning of an irreversible process towards system change and helped narrativise the issue. The July 15th, 2016 failed coup attempt brought about the last phase of securitisation without which the process of system change could not have been realised.

The article's second objective was to analyse the implications of ongoing system-based debate over Turkish democracy by referring to its impact on party politics. The mounting tension between government/opposition relations and polarising political discourse has gradually begun to disturb more people. There is a cyclical pattern in Turkish politics wherein too much polarisation results in the disengagement of electorates from the actors held responsible for that tense atmosphere. The emergence of the AK Party's single-party era was one manifestation of this pattern. The AK Party's unifying and conciliatory tone was appreciated by the people and went on to receive extensive support. Recently, there appeared other political parties defending the same old vocabulary of the AK Party. The Table for Six embodies this growing tendency. The six political parties refer to the concepts of consultation, negotiation, and conciliation. This article has critically examined this novel dimension of party politics in Turkey in terms of alliance and bloc formation that evolved after the shift to a presidential government system. It questions how these new representations of party politics would be functional and sustainable on the way to consensual politics.

The history of coalition formation in Turkish politics demonstrates that the system has never come closer to a consensus model, borrowing from Arend Lijphart's classification of democracies in the

majoritarian-consensual continuum. The majoritarian understanding of democracy has dominated the system and influenced political culture in the Turkish context. That said, the efforts to replace it with a plural, deliberative, and participatory democracy understanding have not been non-existent. The Table for Six has presented a plan for shifting to a strengthened parliamentary system as a demonstration of similar efforts. This intra-opposition alliance that is beyond the customary ways of alliance formation in Turkish politics may provide invaluable experience as regards emphasising the constructive dimension of moderation and conciliation in political language. This is likely to have significant implications for the future of Turkish democracy.

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