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The others of Islamist civilizational populism in AKP's Turkey

IHSAN YILMAZ
SYAZA SHUKRI
KAINAT SHAKIL

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Bios

IHSAN YILMAZ is Research Professor and Chair of Islamic Studies and Inter- cultural Dialogue at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globali- sation (ADI), Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. He has conducted research on nation-building; citizenship; ethnic-religious-political identities and their securitization (Middle East, Pakistan, Indonesia); minority-majority relations (Australia, Turkey, the UK, and the USA); socio-legal affairs, identities, belonging and political participation of Muslim minorities in the West (the UK, Australia, and the USA); Islam-state-society relations in the majority and minority contexts; global Islamic movements; political Islam in a comparative perspective; Turkish politics; authoritarianization; Turkish diasporas (the UK, Australia, the USA); transnationalism; intergroup contact (Australia); and politics of victimhood (Australia, Turkey).

SYAZA SHUKRI is an assistant professor at the Department of Political Science, Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia. Her area of specialization is in comparative politics, specifically in democratization and politics in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Her current research interests include populism, identity politics, inter-ethnic relations, political Islam, geopolitics, and gender studies, specifically in Muslim-majority contexts.

KAINAT SHAKIL is a non-resident Research Associate at the European Center for Populism Studies. Her research explores populism from the perspectives of religion, emotions, and gender. The regional focus of her work is mainly Pakistan and demographically Muslim- majority countries.

ABSTRACT

Turkey's history and politics allow populism and Sunni Islamist civilizationalism to thrive. The ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) use of Islamist authoritarian populism in its second decade of power has widened its "otherization" of political opponents, non-Muslims, non-Sunnis, ethnic minorities, vulnerable groups, and all those who reject the AKP's views and democratic transgressions. To comprehend how Erdogan and his deft colleagues leverage identities of Sunni Islam and Turkish ethnicity, alongside pre-existing collective fears to develop populist authoritarianism, in this article, each category of "the others" is investigated through the lens of civilizational populism. This article specifically delves into the "otherization" process towards the Kemalists, secularists and leftists/liberals, Kurds, Alevis, and practicing Sunni Muslim Gulen Movement. The different methods of AKP's civilizational populist "otherization" continues to polarize an already divided Turkish nation, generating incalculable harm.

INTRODUCTION

The last two decades have transformed Turkey. Previously, the conservative democratic AKP promoted democracy and human rights development in its first decade in power until it got rid of the Kemalist establishment (Yilmaz, 2021; 2021a). The second decade of AKP rule, however, has observed these objectives receding. Instead, the party and leadership have veered into authoritarian territory coinciding with increased rhetoric on Islam and religion (Shukri & Hossain, 2017). The country has suffered a severe reduction in freedom of expression, media restriction, and political persecution (Amnesty international, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2022; Freedom House, 2022). Ankara's constitutional and societal changes weakened government checks and balances and instead promoted religious conservatism (Stockholm Center for Freedom, 2022; Yilmaz, 2022; Yilmaz & Albayrak, 2022).

Populism has shaped politics in the third decade of AKP rule (Balta, Kaltwasser & Yagci, 2022; Taskin, 2022; Yilmaz, 2021; Sozen, 2020; Aytaç & Elçi, 2019). This study examines the AKP's otherization and demonization of "others" through the Turkic Sunni Muslim identity that underpins AKP's civilizational populism. This subset of populism has been used to appeal to nationalist and conservative sentiments and justify AKP's authoritarianism. This article aims to show how Erdogan and his AKP's populist authoritarianism skillfully blends both sentiments by manipulating historical fear of Kemalist suppression. We shall examine AKP's use of civilizational populism by analyzing "the others" it has constructed over two decades. Before that, the following section briefly introduces civilizational populism. The next section then uses civilizational populism to demonstrate the AKP's "otherization" of Turkish nationals who do not agree with the policies and worldview of the AKP. Finally, the conclusion discusses the case study and its implications.

WHAT IS CIVILIZATIONAL POPULISM?

Civilizational populism emphasizes a group's religious, cultural, or historical identity (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2023: 10; Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022). This theory has been used mostly to examine populism in Europe and North America, where anti-migration emotions are dominant (Ozzano & Bolzonar, 2020; Brubaker, 2017; Marzouki et al., 2016; Apahideanu, 2014). The Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy, Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands, and National Front (FN) in France all claim Islam to be a threat to European culture as part of their strategy to get votes (Kaya & Tecmen, 2019).

On the other hand, understanding right- and left-wing politics are useful outside the West in India and Latin America (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022). This paradigm analyzes left-wing populism through figures like Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and Bolivia's Evo Morales. Chavez's "Nuestra América (our America)" and its anti-imperialist rhetoric called North America and past imperial powers a civilizational threat to South Americans that entails Latin American unity (Wajner & Roniger, 2019).

Since 2014, the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has turned India into a center for religious and ethnic minority human rights atrocities (Amnesty International, 2021; Saleem, 2021; Jain and Lasseter, 2018). Civilizational populism—the hallmark of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's populist politics—is responsible for this upsurge in undemocratic tactics (Saleem, 2021; Jain and Lasseter, 2018).

Civilizationalism helps explain populist leaders, movements, and parties in the current political climate. Geographical boundaries, cultural differences, and populist divisiveness are different, but horizontal and vertical populism are still comparable (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022; Taguieff, 1995). This paradigm creates the differences between "the people" and "the elite" and the layers of "moral/pure" people and "immoral" others. Civilizational populism also identifies with religion (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022) through a religious push or a symbolic use of faith for identarian politics (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2021). Religion currently dominates civilizational populism worldwide (Yilmaz, Morieson, & Demir, 2021: 20).

Civilizational populism uses sacred identities like religion to manipulate emotions. Populists might create fear of the civilizational enemy or patriotism by asserting elites and others are threatening the country (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2021: 19). Thus, whether it's the "pink tide" in Latin America, the "Saffron tide" in Asia, or "Make America Great Again (MAGA)", civilizational populism is a useful tool to understand these phenomena (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022). In Turkey, President Erdogan instrumentalizes civilizational populism to create a supposed utopia called "New Turkey" that is based on a specific civilization of Sunni Islam and Turkish identity. This has several constitutive others that we will now analyze.



Kemalists who support the principle of secularism in Turkey, staged peaceful mass rallies in Ankara on April 14, 2007. Photo: Aydın Güven.

THE KEMALISTS

Historically, schisms have existed between Islamist and Kemalist forces in politics (Yilmaz, 2021). The Kemalists were instrumental in reshaping the Ottoman Empire's ruins into a republic. Their ideological foundations were based on modernization objectives of the Ottoman elite, which resulted in the development of the Young Turks (Zürcher, 2010; Hanioglu, 2001). Under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's guidance, the Young Turks evolved into Kemalists (Hanioglu, 2001). The President died in 1938, but his philosophy was carried on by the military-led Kemalist tutelage regime that allowed multi-party politics after 1946 but made sure that Islamists, Socialists and Kurds would not make inroads into mainstream body politics. This has changed with the AKP's second decade in power.

AKP has been promoting itself as the voice and savior of "the people" by showing itself as a democratic force and increasingly the authentic voice of "the people" or "Black Turks." The party has continuously portrayed itself as the face of "Black Turks" empowerment over "White Turks," emphasizing its support for historically marginalized religiously conservative groups. This is due to the lack of democratic liberties during the eight decades of Kemalist government, which pushed for proscriptive secularization (Tunçay, 2019; Zürcher, 2004).

An early example of this may be found in the mid-2000s, when the AKP used the Kemalist-imposed strict attire regulation as a point of civilizational conflict.

Since the founding of the republic, women have been prohibited from wearing headscarves in public places in an effort to modernize Muslims, while men have been required to dress in Western attire (Tutar, 2014; Demiralp, 2012). This top-down imposition of "secular" dress hampered women's mobility in higher-level positions, access to education, and, most importantly, self-expression. Using this conflict, the AKP turned the 2007 election into a campaign of the "White Turks" victimizing the "Black Turks." For example, the First Lady chose to wear her headscarf to all public meetings and functions. While the AKP has never advocated for women's right to choose (Kocamaner, 2018), it has used the First Lady's Islamic faith to accuse the Kemalists of launching a "digital coup" against "democracy" (Yalçin, 2022; Elver, 2016). The image of Kemalists and the liberal opposition as anti-democratic forces was intended to undermine their cause (Yilmaz, 2021a).

The notion of the Kemalist elite's social and economic injustice toward the Turkish masses grew over time. It peaked around 2010, when the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer trials dominated national politics. The Ergenekon trials looked at high-ranking Kemalists suspected of trying to destabilize the AKP-led government as a way of "White Turks" overturning "the people's" government. The Sledgehammer trials targeted military leaders accused of preparing a coup against the government. Despite being very contentious, with several defendants ultimately acquitted or sentenced to lesser terms, the trial turned Kemalists from cultural threats of "corrupt" and "uncaring" elites to a security concern (Yilmaz, 2021; Tahiroglu, 2020; Ozdemir, 2015; Tisdall, 2012).

The Turkish Referendum in 2010 took place against this backdrop which weakened the military and judiciary's involvement in politics (Yilmaz, 2021; Şahin & Hayirali, 2010). While the vendetta against the Kemalists exploited civilizational populist feelings, the events of 2010 were a strategy to keep the AKP in power. As the Kemalists were demonized and politically pacified, their main party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), became "the other," while the "Black Turks" were eventually represented by the AKP.

Despite setbacks, the CHP has remained active in politics, making it a frequent target of AKP civilizational populism. The CHP has been accused of coups and being a co-conspirator with "Western enemies" on multiple occasions. In 2021, President Erdogan commented about the party's bad impact on national prosperity by referencing prior coup attempts: *"They constantly vow to bring us down. They have threatened me with the same end as (Adnan) Menderes. All the initiatives to threaten us with coups are being done with the help of CHP... Coups and walking together with the enemies of the state have become part of CHP leaderships' genes" (Birgun, 2021a).*

Furthermore, the party members have been characterized as adversaries of Islam, with many accusing them as being puppets of the West and pawns employed to harm Islam. A statement made by

Turkey's Minister of Justice, Bekir Bozdag, targeting Huseyin Aygun, a CHP deputy, is an example of this characterization: *"Recently, one of their deputies used a language that insults the Messenger of Allah, the Prophet. If you respect the spirituality, religion and values of this country and this nation, o Kılıçdaroğlu, then you have to put this presumptuous faithless to his place"* (Merhaba Yozgat,2014).

On some occasions CHP or Kemalists are also depicted as a threat by aligning them with local "others." This includes charges that CHP members support "terrorist groups" such as the Gulenists or the Kurdish community, two groups that will be discussed in more detail later. Fikri Isik, a cabinet minister, linked the CHP to the Gulen Movement by saying: *"The parallel establishment [Gulenists] are a gang, and CHP is working with them. Until today we have not let any gang operate inside the state, and from now on we won't let any of them operate either" (Pusula, 2014).*

Erdogan has not shied away from making these claims. He accused CHP of being affiliated with a diverse group of "others" during a public appearance in 2019 close to the local election. He asked voters to consider their children's "future," as he put it: "*We are not serving as a subcontractor to that charlatan in Pennsylvania and the terrorist network in Qandil [Mountains] just to get a few more votes as the CHP [...] On March 31, you will vote for our independence and our future through the election of mayors*" (Hurriyet Daily News, 2019).

In another case, Suleyman Soylu, the AKP's Interior Minister at the time, prohibited CHP regional chairmen from attending the funeral of a Turkish soldier killed in a confrontation with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The minister claimed that the CHP were PKK supporters and that they should instead attend the funerals of PKK soldiers (Kucukgocmen, 2018).

To retain its two-decade-long authoritarian hold on politics, the AKP is capitalizing on century-old schisms and grudges. It has used Turkish history to instigate a crisis, instill collective trauma and mass fear, and, most significantly, to divide and redefine society (Yilmaz & Albayrak, 2022a, 2022b; Yilmaz & Shipoli, 2022). It has created a new concept of "the people" and "the others" in the process. Despite its efforts to distance itself from Kemalist oppression, Erdogan's AKP is motivated by Kemalist authoritarianism and uses the follies of the previous administration to justify its political crimes and social reengineering of Turkish citizens (Cook, 2016).



Protests sparked by plans to build on the Gezi Park have broadened into nationwide anti government unrest on June 11, 2013 in Istanbul, Turkey. Photo: Thomas Koch.

SECULARISTS AND LEFTISTS

The concept of a "White Turk" extends beyond Kemalists to secularists and left-wing politicians. While Kemalists represent administrative elites such as the military and judiciary, secularists and leftists are individuals who do not subscribe to AKP's political ideology. Since the early 2010s, these groups have been a regular target of populist civilizational otherization by the AKP. This sub-group, like the Kemalists, is accused of posing a security and cultural threat to Turkey. They are also accused of being Western agents and alleged co-conspirators with local otherized groups.

The Gezi protests in Istanbul are examples of the simultaneous beginning and continuation of the otherization process as a new approach to gain political traction (Shukri, 2019).

Initially, the rally was a peaceful protest against AKP-led development projects encroaching on public places. It grew to symbolize the public's rising discontent with the party. The escalating intensity of the protests resulted in the paralysis of major cities and clashes between unarmed people and state officials (Yilmaz, 2021, 2021a, 2021b). Through a victimization rhetoric, several groups were "otherized" in order to divert attention and highlight Erdogan's legitimacy. Secularists and leftists were particularly targeted during these protests. They were depicted as rioters or, at times, Western operatives out to destabilize Turkey's economic development and discredit its Islamic values.

Erdogan's use of fear and

retribution to create a civilizational crisis is visible in his statements: *"Those who work against Turkey will tremble with fear," and "What is happening in Taksim is not only about the Gezi Park. These are events that have links outside and inside of Turkey" (Yilmaz, 2021; The Guardian, 2013). As prime minister, he publicly accused leftist forces of being behind the protests. During an interview in Tunisia, he explained: "But as I told you earlier, some terrorist groups are involved." He claimed this to implicate an illegal left-wing militant organization, which was accused of bombing the US Embassy in Ankara the same year, with the protests* (Weaver, 2013).

On the sixth anniversary of the protests, Erdogan has proceeded to marginalize members of the left. In 2019, he reiterated his point of view: *"In the past, some have destroyed our cities claiming that they wanted to protect the environment. We are here planting trees. So, where are they who claimed that they care about trees? None of them is here"* (aHaber, 2019).

Even in 2022, Erdogan stood by his 2013 statements about "Westernized" youth. The President accused them of vandalizing a mosque by torching it, violating the mosque's spiritual precepts, and drinking there. All these claims have been refuted (Duvar English, 2022). Erdogan has also asserted that the culprits were foreign sponsored in order to destabilize the country. He said: *"Everyone is now understanding who the powers behind the Gezi protesters were. They are together with the terrorist-lovers" (Independent Türkçe, 2022).*

Beyond Gezi protests, similar civilizational threats and anxieties have been used in various uprisings. When university students and faculty members protested the appointment of a pro-AKP leader to a university in 2021, the issue swiftly deteriorated into a gender debate. The students and professors at Bogazici University were opposed to an AKP-appointed president, culminating in a large protest that was eventually "managed" by police forces in Istanbul's center (Gall, 2021). Erdogan and his allies used a Gezi Park-style approach to deny the opposition's legitimacy. After spotting a pride flag attached to a photograph of the holy Kaaba, police accused the students of being 'delinquents' and disrespectful to Turkish and Muslim culture during the campus raids (The Independent, 2021). Erdogan, as a populist, successfully side-lined the appointment and portrayed the students as a group of Western-inspired troublemakers by using homophobic undertones to appease a vote base favorable to Islamism.

While addressing the protests, Erdogan accused left-wing and secular groups of encouraging violence. He said: *"These youngsters [Bogazici protestors] who are members of terrorist organizations, do not represent our national and moral values. Are you students or are you terrorists who wanted to occupy the office of the rector? We won't let terrorists take over this country. Mr. Kemal [Kilicdaroglu] you can continue your journey with your terrorist friends, but we will never be together with terrorists. There is no such thing as LGBT. This country is moral, and it will go into the future*

with these values. This country won't bow to terrorists and will never live another Gezi protest" **(NTV, 2021).**

He specially categorized them as "terrorist youth, communist youth" and promised to eradicate their presence by saying: "Universities would not educate terrorist youth, universities should educate the youth that will serve the motherland and the nation" (Cumhuriyet, 2018). He also singled out CHP Istanbul chair Canan Kaftancioglu, who was essential in the party's 2019 electoral win in Istanbul. Erdogan accused her of being a terrorist because she supported the protests: "Unfortunately, we see the chair of Istanbul branch of CHP, who has no relations to the students, but anyway she is a militant of DHKP-C [Marxist-Leninist Communist Party, identified as a terrorist organization by Turkey]" (Erdogan, 2021).

Following this, Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu blasted the Chair on Twitter: *"Canan Kaftancioglu is the clown of terrorist organizations. The chair of CHP's Istanbul branch is personnel of DHKP-C, PKK/KCK and MLKP terrorist organizations. She already has a sentence of 1 year and 8 months for propagating for PKK/KCK and DHKP-C, according to Istanbul's 37th Criminal Court, file no 2019/171"* (Soylu, 2021).

Furthermore, the AKP increasingly attacks the LGBTQ+ community. The government has used pre-existing homophobic prejudices among ultra-conservative groups to denounce the community. It is critical to note that identifying as LGBTQ+ is not illegal in Turkey; nonetheless, the AKP has bred "distrust" in the community by portraying them as a cultural threat to Islam. Various instances, such as the suspension of yearly pride celebrations, are presented as a way of protecting the Islamist ethos of a Sunni Muslim Turkey, and demonstrations have sometimes been trivialized by tying them to the topic of gender fluidity (Ahval, 2021).

In addition to the university demonstrations described earlier, the AKP has used gender as a civilisational strategy. Erdogan stated to AKP youth branches: *"You don't represent the LGBT youth. You are not the broken youth, on the contrary, you are the youth that raises the broken hearts. I believe in you, I trust you"* (Diken, 2021).

Other secular voices in Turkey have been repressed through the use of religion. Erdogan chastised Turkey's most famous pop star Sezen Aksu for insulting Islam. Aksu is well-known for being candid about her feelings towards the regime. Following the release of her 2017 song Şahane Bir Şey Yaşamak, she was accused of demeaning Adam and Eve. She was mocked online by AKP supporters when the President said:*"No one's tongue can reach our Prophet Adam [Hz. Adem]. It is our duty to cut those stretching tongues when the place comes. No one's tongue can reach our mother Eve. It is our duty to give them what they deserve"* (DW, 2022).

When viewed under the prism of Islamist civilizational populism, it is clear that Erdogan and the AKP have systematically used secular and left-wing groups as scapegoats during times of political disapproval.

These groups have consistently been regarded as suspicious, hostile, and dangerous. They are viewed as both a national security concern and a challenge to the faith. They are also suspected of collaborating with local “others” and foreign forces.



People walk by the bombed buildings after the curfew in Şırnak, Turkey on March 3, 2016.

KURDISH OPPOSITION

Kurds have long been seen as "second-class citizens" in Turkey (Yegen, 2004; Yildiz, 2001). During Kemalist leadership, the implicit promotion of Turkish as the state's ultimate ethnicity frequently marginalized the ethnically diverse Kurdish people (Yilmaz, 2021). Throughout Kemalists' eighty-year rule, the state forced the Kurdish community to "assimilate" to Turkish culture. As a result, the Kurdish language was prohibited in parts of Eastern Turkey, as well as in government-owned institutions and organizations (Jongerden, 2007; Yildiz, 2001: 281). Informally, government officials stopped registering Kurdish names in order to force Kurdish citizens to "Turkify" their names (Yilmaz, 2021). Despite the cultural annihilation, Kemalists attempted to persuade Kurds that they are "brothers" to Turks due to shared beliefs (Yilmaz, 2021). Throughout the years, the state has been quite proactive in criminalizing the Kurdish population, with any criticism of the regime or opposition made by the Kurds being seen as terrorism or a criminal violation (Yilmaz, Demir & Shipoli, 2022).

The AKP sought for reconciliation with the Kurdish population in its early years (2002-2010). This was in sharp contrast to the position of the Kemalist state, which denied the existence of Kurds in modern-day Turkey. Erdogan and his colleagues were optimistic about talks between the government and the armed Kurdish movement in Eastern Turkey. A cease-fire was established after the PKK was summoned to Ankara for talks. Following decades of disputes,

this cleared the way for negotiations. Reforms such as allowing the use of Kurdish language in official capacity and participation in educational institutions were debated and, to some extent, authorized during the AKP's early "democratic" phase in office (Yilmaz, 2021; Karakoc, 2020; Martin, 2018; Geri, 2017; Ozpek, 2017). These reforms not only resulted in the democratization of formerly securitized Kurdish pockets in Eastern Turkey, but also paved the way for language programmes, cultural activities, and media backing for Kurdish-led projects (Yilmaz, Demir & Shipoli, 2022). It was a welcome addition to the AKP's previous initiatives that de-securitized the Kurdish minority after decades of cultural extinction.

During the height of Ankara-PKK reconciliation talks, however, the Kurds were re-securitized. This occurred shortly after the AKP lost power in the June 2015 elections (Yilmaz et al., 2021; Karadeniz, 2015; Smith, 2005). The Kurdish peace process had come to a stop and was worsening rapidly. The AKP was experiencing economic difficulties, and the corruption scandal affected its public image. Turkey's ambitions of entering the European Union, which had driven its democratization in the 2000s, were also diminishing (Yilmaz, 2021, 2021a, 2021b). Furthermore, a political party pushing for Kurdish rights and liberal ideas was pulling Kurdish votes away from the AKP by this time (Geri, 2017). The Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) posed a strong threat to Erdogan and his colleagues. During this time, many state institutions demonized Kurds and portrayed them as "the others," and the Kurdish peace movement came to a halt and was destroyed.

The HDP's threat to the AKP became clear during the 2015 election campaign, when the opposition party criticized Erdogan's proposed presidential reforms (Ozpek, 2019; Bianet, 2015). In the 2015 elections, the HDP won 80 seats, threatening Erdogan's authoritarian ambitions (Candar, 2019). During the early stages of the AKP's authoritarianism, civilizational populism was utilized to turn Kurds from "brothers" to "security threats." Erdogan called two general elections in five months in 2015, coinciding with the re-securitization of the Kurds, resulting in turmoil.

Unfortunately, a succession of violent attacks in several locations hampered the Kurdish peace effort. The state accused the PKK of the attacks and imposed a state of emergency in Eastern Kurdish districts, allowing security forces to search for Kurdish "terrorists" including the HDP. Despite simply being pro-Kurdish, the HDP was portrayed as a pro-terrorist party. The AKP was portrayed as a pro-people hero preventing the HDP, an alleged terrorist sympathizer, from capturing control of the parliament. Thus, the HDP was "otherized" for being ethnically unique and posing a threat to "the people."

While the HDP was marginalized and the Kurdish community was labelled as a "problem," the AKP sought a new political alliance with the ultra-right wing Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) (Yilmaz, Caman & Bashirov, 2020). Erdogan has called for a jihad-style response to "threats"

posed by the HDP and Kurds in general, with the MHP on his side. Part of this strategy is accusing political opponents of collaborating with the PKK. For example, Erdogan's coalition partner, Bahceli, accused Istanbul mayor of hiring PKK militants, claiming that *"these terrorists employed by the Municipality are jeopardizing National Security"* (T24, 2021). Another example of how the party and its allies consistently prove "the others" are co-conspirators is re-securitizing the PKK as a threat and aligning them with resistance. This allows them to threaten the groups with a shroud of civilizational menace.

The AKP attacked the HDP with the accusations of "Irreligious, Communist, Armenian, Uncircumcised" to reduce HDP's votes below the threshold (Adalet Biz, 2015). In June 2018 speaking at a political rally in Diyarbakir, Erdogan addressed majority Kurdish audience as follows: *'Are we ready to teach them [HDP] their lesson on June 24 [date for general elections]? … Do they have any connection to our values? Do they have any connection whatsoever to Islam? They are atheists, they are irreligious'* (Ahval, 2018).

In March 2019 he spoke about the HDP and claimed that: *"They [HDP] shot [bombed] the Kurşunlu Mosque. Who? The irreligious, unbelieving, atheist team called HDP. They have such a structure. They ignored if it is a mosque and so on"* (Arti Gercek 2019).

In November 2021 speaking in pre-dominantly Kurdish city of Batman, President Erdogan targeted at HDP with following accusations: *"What am I saying, is there a Turkish, Kurdish, Laz or Circassian distinction in my religion? But this PKK, this HDP has no religious faith!'* (Birgun, 2021b).

The Kurdish example shows too how the AKP has successfully outcasted its political opponents by generating civilizational populist fear and anxiety in them through the use of religious rhetoric. It has taken advantage of the Kemalists' pre-existing distrust of ethnic minorities and made it feasible in a new context.



Alevi people are seen in Semah ceremony in Istanbul, Turkey on June 27, 2013. Alevism is a mystical branch of Islam. Its adherents are followers of Ali and his descendant, Alevi saint Haji Bektash Veli.

ALEVIS

Historically, Alevis were considered by Sunni majority as "suspicious" and untrustworthy (White, 2017). During the first eighty years of Turkish history, Alevis, who constituted around 10 percent of the population, were almost unknown. Alevism is founded on Shia-inspired theological teaching, yet it has been labelled a heretic cult. Because Alevism differs from the state-endorsed Sunni Islam, they are regular targets of the AKP (Dressler, 2015). Furthermore, during times of civil turmoil, the community is portrayed as an untrustworthy group and a security threat to the country. The community was not targeted throughout the first decade of the AKP's administration. However, 2010 marked the start of the otherization process, which has only accelerated.

The first onslaught on Alevis was launched by the AKP administration in 2010, when Erdogan was leading the party into dictatorial ambitions. Erdogan expressed dissatisfaction with the country's judicial system at a public speech to mobilize support for the constitutional referendum (Yilmaz & Shipoli, 2022). The next year, when CHP leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu was targeted by the AKP, sectarianism was reignited. Kilicdaroglu's faith, Alevism, was brought up in the conversation in order to publicly humiliate him (Yilmaz & Shipoli, 2022).

By the time the Gezi demonstrations occurred, the blatant charges against protestors had grown, with the government and its

leadership portraying them as Alevis despite the presence of other groups at the rallies (Karakaya-Stump, 2014). This prompted the state to target Alevi neighborhoods in order to quell protests, resulting in the community being subjected to state-sanctioned brutality (Karakaya-Stump, 2014). Karakaya-Stump (2018: 62) reported on community profiling during the crackdown as follows: *"The release of a police report, according to which 78 percent of those detained during the protests were Alevi, was no doubt part of the same deliberate strategy to vilify the protests in the eyes of conservative Sunnis."*

Following the 2013 events, this targeting and harassment of Alevis not only continued, but expanded beyond the police to media outlets (Lord, 2018: 158). During the Gezi protests, a gas canister wounded a small boy. Erdogan called the 15-year-old Alevi child a "terrorist" in order to excuse the police assault (Hurriyet Daily News, 2013). Worse, Erdogan said of the death of an Alevi boy caused by police brutality: *"There was a funeral in Istanbul recently. Unfortunately, there was a child from the terrorist organizations, with a baggy face, a slingshot in his hand, and iron balls in his pockets, and unfortunately, he was exposed to a tear gas. How will the police know how old that person is, with a puffy face and a slingshot in his hand, tossing iron balls? But Kılıcdaroglu is lying as usual, saying 'the boy went out to buy bread.' Be honest. What does it have to do with bread?"* (Oda TV, 2014).

Unlike the Kurds, who were ethnically different, Alevis were eventually portrayed as "threats" or "suspect," with roots in sectarianism.In July 2016 and ensuing years, the situation exacerbated and got more severe. The AKP accused Alevis of being pro-Gulenists and hence "untrustworthy" collaborators with "FETO" and its alleged Western masters (Yeni Safak, 2016). Erdogan creates "the enemy" through a discursive chain of equivalences in which Alevis are akin to Gulenists and Gulenists are analogous to the despised West. These claims are reflected in Erdogan's statement: *"Parties, marginal groups and terrorist organizations that did not even greet each other until yesterday, all of a sudden, lined up on the same side. The marginals who made fun of the values of this nation, the boils of the idea of Alevism without Ali, the enthusiasts of February 28 [coup], all came together. The main opposition party is at the top of the line. Behind them is the party that claims to be a nationalist [IYI Party], and next to them is the party under the control of the terrorist organization [HDP]. The parallel organization [Gulenists], the separatist organization [PKK], the terrorist organization that killed our prosecutor in Caglayan Courthouse [DHKP-C], and the Armenian lobby are right behind them"* (Oda TV, 2015).

In addition to securitization, the AKP has attempted to portray Alevism as alien to Islam and, at times, as a threat. During a trip to Germany, he openly labelled them as atheists. He said: *"In Germany, there is something like 'Alevism without Ali.' In other words, there is an atheist understanding, a structure that they*

guise of Alevism. They try to project that onto us. We said that there is no such Alevis in Turkey. There's a handful of them in Germany and the Germans support them, then they come and speak in their name here" (Cumhuriyet, 2014).

At other instances AKP has labelled them as distrustful and "fake" Muslims. In 2015 Erdogan said: *"... there is something we are seeing where there are people who say they are Muslims, but because they are from different sects, they defend even those who are atheists in the fight against terrorism in our country. We see such an approach. But when it comes to words, they say, 'We are Muslims.' But on the other hand, we see those who defend terrorist and atheist organizations because of this sectarian difference. So, we must be vigilant against them"* (Hurriyet, 2015)

The AKP's portrayal of a largely misunderstood faith under the party's developing Sunni overtone has incited the general public. Alevism's status as a spiritual faith, affiliation with Shia-inspired ideology, and recent labelling as "untrustworthy" or "disloyal" have exposed the group to mob violence. In addition to being imprisoned and labelled a "suspect," a number of people have committed horrible crimes against Alevis in recent years, including physical and psychological harm (Topuz, 2021; Bulut, 2020).



Thousands of people gather in solidarity outside Zaman newspaper in Istanbul on March 05, 2016 in Istanbul, Turkey. Zaman Media Group, which was affiliated with the Gulen Movement, was seized by Erdogan regime on March 4, 2016.

THE GULEN MOVEMENT

The Gulen Movement is led by Fethullah Gulen. When the Kemalist state prosecuted Gulen on charges of planning to destabilize the system, he was pushed into self-imposed exile in the United States (Balci, 2014; Tol, 2014; Angey, 2018). In the 2000s, the Movement and the AKP became significant allies on a number of social and political fronts (Yilmaz, 2021). However, splits arose in the alliance in late 2013 which eventually led to the utter vilification of the leader and the group's members as "terrorists" (Sanderson, 2018). Since 2016, the state has labelled the movement as the Fethullahist Terrorist Organization (FETO), and it has employed every available tool to criminalize, punish, and harm its members (Yilmaz, 2021; 2021a, 2021b; Tol, 2014). This change from allies to security threats may be the AKP's most direct attempt to create a new class of "others" through civilizational populism.

Erdogan chose to accuse the Movement's president of being a "foreign" entity hostile to the republic and its people. This is typical of a populist leader who depicts "the enemy" as not belonging to "the people." Civilizational populists regard "the others" within a country as morally "evil" because they come from a different civilization with presumably lower moral and religious standards (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2023: 38). Erdogan used the same language to resuscitate Gulen's 1990s charge of regime upheaval and portray it as conspirators. Erdogan used people's fear and suspicion of the West in order to depict Gulen as a

Western ally out to impede Turkey's ostensible progress (Day, 2016).

Erdogan and prominent party members were embroiled in a corruption scandal on December 17/25, 2013. Leaked phone tapes implicated Erdogan, various members of his family, and the AKP leadership in severe instances of corruption and nepotism (Day, 2016). Cunningly, the entire tapes leak mess shifted from an AKP corruption issue to one of national security. The audio leaks, according to Erdogan, are a "judicial coup" against his party. He accused the Gulen Movement, which at the time had members in the police and civil services, of "spying" on the government and leaking state secrets.

The AKP-led government used "the threat of Gulenists" being "foreign agents" to begin its first wave of purges against them. Hundreds of police officers were arrested, and members of public service office were terminated from their work for allegedly jeopardizing the country's "security." Throughout this pandemonium, word of a change on the prosecution bench in the AKP corruption case went unnoticed. The pro-AKP media was active in demonizing the movement and ignoring the corruption trial's conclusion (Day, 2016; Butler, 2014; The Guardian, 2014). Erdogan described his actions as necessary to fight purported national security concerns. He went on to say: *"At the moment, we are eliminating a new coup attempt that started on December 17, and we are deactivating a new attack, a new sabotage. We have demonstrated with all the evidence that this is not a corruption issue, but a sabotage attempt against democracy, a strengthening economy, active foreign policy, and especially the solution [Kurdish and Alevi opening] process" (AA, 2014).*

Using conspiracy theories provided justification to the public about their fear of the "parallel system" and its Western rulers, rather than just a means of instilling fear. Erdogan portrayed himself as the "man who holds Turkey together," which appeared to be an emotional play to appease the public (Yilmaz, Caman & Bashirov, 2020). In order to instill terror and consolidate the AKP's grasp on power, the Gulen Movement was used as a scapegoat in a conventional "rally behind the flag" strategy. Erdogan's allegations persisted throughout 2014. His next statement demonstrates his disdain for the erstwhile ally and its persistent presentation as a threat to the country: *"These are blackmailers, they have data storages. They extract things from everywhere at any moment, and they are organized. They rent houses around [their targets] and listen and watch from there, they are such a treacherous organization. There is a treacherous terrorist organization right now. This is a terrorist organization. It is our duty to take the necessary measures against it. This Pennsylvania [referring to Gulen] took down the leader of the CHP by this type of tape"* (Yeni Şafak, 2014)

Even before to the controversial coup attempt in July 2016, the Movement's members and leadership were suspected of assisting foreign conspiracies.

addressed the group in 2015, saying:*"Shame on them [the base of the GM supporters, not the decision makers] if they can't see that the parallel structure still cooperates with MOSSAD. This structure is not just a structure that attacked me. First of all, it attacked Turkey's national security and integrity. [...] They are not national. Those who do business with them will soon experience embarrassment. Whoever does not take a stand against them has done injustice to their country, conscience, and religion"* (BBC, 2015)

A year after the 2015 elections, in which the AKP was fighting for its political survival, the 2016 coup attempt proved decisive. The coup was utilized by Erdogan to instill fear, worry, uncertainty, and distrust of "the others." He accused the Gulenists of staging the coup on Western directions. Following the events, Erdogan openly targeted Gulen, saying: *"I have a message for Pennsylvania [referring to Gulen]... you have committed enough treason against this nation. Return to your homeland if you dare"* (Arango & Yeginsu, 2016). Following the broadcast of this warning, the foundation's activities both inside and outside of Turkey were seized, as was an extensive witch-hunting of its sympathizers. People were encouraged to believe, through official media manipulation and populist rhetoric, that Gulen and his followers are Western-backed conspirators out to destabilize the AKP. The narrative cast the AKP as "the people's" last hope for stability, while the Movement was heavily criticized (Yilmaz, 2021, 2021a, 2021b;

Following the coup attempt, Gulen Movement-led schools were closed and transferred to AKP partners or simply placed under government control. Businesses owned by supporters of the movement were seized and distributed among AKP supporters. Academics, journalists, teachers, and families were unjustly imprisoned and punished behind closed doors. The authorities formally branded the Movement as a "terrorist" organization, renaming it FETO. As a result, thousands of "FETOists" have been imprisoned or expelled (Yilmaz, 2021a). The president justified his decision in the following way: *"The name 'Fethullahist Terrorist Organization' is officially recorded, and we sent the recommendation to the Council of Ministers. The Council of Ministers also made its decision, and the decision came to us for approval. We approved it and now it is included in this National Security Policy Document. They tore this nation apart; we will not give an opportunity to those who tear this nation apart. They will pay for this. Some of them escaped, some are currently on trial in prisons. This process will continue like this"* (DW, 2016)

AKP has been very successful in exploiting the Gulen Movement to create an enemy by characterizing it as an ally of the long-feared Western powers representing the civilizational "others" to Turkey's Islamic "people." Based on pre-existing trauma from the Ottoman Empire's demise, Erdogan developed a clash of civilizations - styled narrative. Turkey has "internal opponents" who collaborate with "foreign powers" to hinder its progress.

As a result, the Turkish government has accused the group of being a threat to Islam as well. In one such statement, the President articulated his point of view: *"FETO is a very insidious terrorist organization that hides behind the religion of Islam and looks like a modern face, but is actually bloody, tyrannical and aims to take over the world. For this reason, the organization does not only concern [is a threat to] Turkey, but all countries in the world. The fact that FETO is organized in 160 countries helps us determine the goals of the organization"* (TCCB, 2019)

To remain politically relevant and to mask the AKP's escalating political crimes, Erdogan deploys Islamist populism laced with civilizationalism which has changed even a former Sunni Muslim Turkish ally into a prime example of "the other."



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Photo: Mustafa Kirazlı.

CONCLUSION

Turkey is currently volatile and autocratic. Previously, the varied Turkish population had been under an authoritarian Kemalist regime that tried to alter its culture for nearly 80 years. The secular Kemalist ideal citizen was created out of the First World War's pain and humiliation which shaped their views of other cultures and the West. The Young Turks and their successors ended the monarchy but failed to turn the republic into a democracy with social capital. Many left, rebelled, conformed, or hid from the state's tyranny. But this wounded the suppressed communities. Pre-AKP Turkey experienced widespread mistrust, persecution, and injustice.

In the early 2000s, the AKP emerged as a democratic movement, raising hopes of tackling these social inequities and other concerns. Unfortunately, the AKP's goal of reversing modern Turkish politics' harsh legacy was thwarted by EU estrangement, economic problems, democratization failure, Erdogan's corruption, and Islamist ideology. The AKP progressively established an electoral authoritarian regime coinciding with increased rhetoric on Islam and religion. Islamist civilizationalism and populism enabled this transformation. Despite its name, worldwide engagement, and vision, "New Turkey" is similar to Kemalist Turkey. It still pits identities and ideals. These contrasts have created deep divisions that the AKP has used to keep power.

Erdogan and his party have used populism to create "the people"from an oppressed Turkic Sunni Muslim majority and give the "majority" a voice and representation. This mainstreaming appears to help a religiously and socially marginalized population. The AKP, official institutions, and pro-regime entities have also reinforced this group's fears, uncertainties, and misgivings. Islamist civilizationists' concerns and hopes have helped Erdogan and his party succeed in Turkish politics. On the other hand, "the others"—both domestic and abroad—are growing. The AKP's fear factory has criminalized and maligned millions, from Kemalists to human rights groups. Sadly, "otherization" violates human rights and democratic liberties (see figure 1 for AKP's list of "the others").

FIGURE 1: USE OF CIVILISATIONAL POPULISM BY AKP TO CREATE "THE OTHERS"

The "other"	When it began	Categorization of "the others" by AKP
Kemalists	* The Ergenekon trials were used to motivate the 2010 Turkish constitutional referendum. * Intensifies and continues.	* Disloyal to Islam and the nation. * Co-conspirators of Western enemies. * Referred to as White Turks. * Corrupt. * Selfish elite. * Disconnected elite. * A obstacle in reaching Ottoman glory.
Kurds	* Ceasefire and peace with PKK stopped in 2015. * Re-securitization of Kurdish population continues.	* Viewed as outsiders in Turkish land and to Turkish culture. * Highly securitized. * Seen as criminals or terrorists, making them a security threat for the nation. * Untrustworthy and co-conspirators of the West and other outside forces. * Often characterized as uncivilized or "mountain people."

The “other”	When it began	Categorization of “the others” by AKP
Seculars & Leftists	* Have been under attack since Gezi protests in 2013. * Sporadic attacks at various events toward different subgroups such as feminists, seculars, leftists, and LGBTQ+ community members.	* Misguided by Western influences. * A threat to the Muslim “way of life.” * Funded by alleged foreign forces. * Values seen alien to Turkish culture and Islam. * Viewed as a moral and cultural threat to the religion and nation. * Often used as scapegoats e.g., rowdy youth leading to riots.
Alevis	* Talks about Alevis being in hold of judiciary around the 2010 referendum. * Previous examples include demonizing Alevi youth during Gezi protests. * Marked rise in AKP leadership targeting the group post-2016. As a consequence, rise in hate crime against Alevis in recent years.	* Mistrusted based on their religious outlook such as being labelled as heretics and accused of corrupt faith. * At times of riots the group is posed as a security threat but more so a cultural threat to Sunni Islam.

The "other"	When it began	Categorization of "the others" by AKP
The Gulen Movement (GM)	* Fractures appeared in 2013. * Declared a terrorist outfit in 2016 following the attempted coup d'état. * Otherization continues to take place.	* Seen as Western "agents". * Classified as traitors to the nation. * Accused of being cultists. * By extension classified as non-Muslims at time by the Directorate of Religious Affairs. * Labelled as a terrorist organization, Fethullahist Terrorist Organization (FETO). * Members of the movements are also declared terrorists called "FETOists."

Erdogan's political ideology is to create many crises to frighten the Turkish people. It enables him to deflect attention from the party's fundamental shortcomings and sell himself and the party as the savior while marginalizing or limiting political and civil society opposition voices.

After two decades in power, Ankara's power center has helped solidify the AKP's narratives. Erdogan believes Islam is a singular entity, thus he teaches the people to fear and loathe anyone who practices their faith differently, portraying any deviation from his own interpretation of Islam as an attack on "real Islam" (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2023: 68). History of Kemalist Turkey enabled this. The party inherited these "traumas" from early years of Islamist politics. These trauma points formed "crises" that currently threatens Turkey and Islam in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

However, the AKP is vulnerable despite its Islamist civilizational populist victory. Political and societal unrest has always threatened the party's power. AKP has created new conspiracy

theories to cast its own citizens as "others" with each general election. Without a doubt, Erdogan will stir up fear to win the upcoming 2023 general and presidential elections. During this process, we will, most probably, see lots of anti-Western, anti-Kemalist, anti-secularist, anti-leftist, anti-Kurdish, anti-Alevi and anti-Gulenists hate speeches and demonizations from different AKP figures.

Unfortunately, manipulation, unfairness, and violence harm citizens, social capital, and social cohesion. Even if the AKP loses power, its two decades in power have deepened divisions. After decades of "otherization" and fearmongering to subjugate a society, democracy must be fought for. For the time being, civilizational populism looks to be thriving in the country, pitting citizens against one other.

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