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From National to Manufactured: The Evolution of the AKP's Victimhood Narratives

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Abstract

This paper explores the dynamic interplay of victimhood narratives, populism, and civilizational rhetoric in Turkish Islamist politics, centering on the tenure of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Tracing the historical trajectory of Islamist victimhood and its evolution, the study reveals how the AKP strategically fused domestic victimhood politics with Islamist civilizational populism. These narrative positions the AKP as the advocate for the victimized Sunni Muslim Turkish nation against a perceived pro-Western, secular, and corrupt elite. This narrative extends beyond the national level, portraying the AKP as the defender of the Muslim ummah against alleged Western conspiracies. Challenging existing literature that characterizes the AKP's current victimhood discourse as a mere continuation of its Turkish Islamist victimhood narrative, this paper argues for its significant evolution. It introduces two additional layers constituting a 'new' victimhood: 1) a national victimhood discourse and 2) manufactured victimhood. In the post-Gezi Protests era, the AKP not only revisits its Islamist victimhood mindset, inclusive of anti-Western conspiracies, but also adopts a nationalist victimhood discourse through a mimetic process, seamlessly integrating it with its existing Turkish Islamist victimhood narrative. Furthermore, with the AKP's rise to hegemonic status, the party strategically manufactures a novel victimhood narrative, rooted in conspiracy theories alleging Western opposition to the leader of the Muslim World, Turkey. This narrative strategy enables the AKP to deflect criticism, legitimize crackdowns, and solidify its grip on power. By unpacking these layers of victimhood, this paper provides a nuanced understanding of the AKP's evolving narrative strategy and its implications for the political landscape in Turkey.

Keywords: *victimhood, manufactured victimhood, Islamism, conspiracy theories, Turkey, Erdogan, populism, religious populism, civilizational populism*

Introduction

Within Turkish politics, the fusion of populist victimhood narratives has emerged as a potent force, catalyzing shifts in ideologies, political strategies, and societal perceptions. This paper embarks on a multifaceted exploration of these developments, by dissecting the evolution and strategic amalgamation of victimhood discourses, populism, and civilizational rhetoric within Turkish Islamist politics. Central to this study is an in-depth analysis of these narratives, with a particular focus on their manifestation and transformation during the AKP's tenure. Historical grievances, intertwined with conspiratorial narratives and appeals to the victimhood of the Sunni Muslim Turkish nation, form the bedrock of these ideologies.

Beginning with a historical exposition of perceived injustices and pivotal events that sowed the seeds of Turkish Islamist victimhood, this paper navigates the roots of these victimhood narratives. Within these, segments of conservative society are portrayed as historically oppressed under the Kemalist elite, casting the AKP as the sole and genuine representative of the victimized Sunni Muslim Turkish nation. Moreover, this study illuminates the confluence of victimhood with populist rhetoric, epitomized by the AKP's portrayal of itself as the champion of the people against a corrupt and oppressive elite. Furthermore, the analysis delves into civilizational populism, where the AKP constructs itself as the guardian of Turkish identity, fending off alleged Western conspiracies and positioning Turkey as a bulwark against external threats. Importantly, this analysis demonstrates how these narratives have transitioned victimhood from a solely national to a transnational experience by framing the ummah as under threat – and Turkey as its savior.

In societies entrenched in prolonged and unresolved conflicts, perceptions of victimhood emerge as integral within the narratives of populist political parties. Members of the in-group engage in a subjective process of branding the out-group as morally unjust and assigning blame to the group for perceived and actual harms. In contrast, the members of the in-group are presented as the sole victims of these supposed internal and external threats. This subjective process is associated with a higher degree of conspiratorial thinking. A strong correlation has been identified between a sense of victimhood and a propensity to embrace conspiracy theories. Collective experiences of perceived victimization, in particular, heighten susceptibility to adopting conspiracy stereotypes (Bilewicz & Sedek, 2015).

Following instances of perceived discrimination, disadvantage, or being targeted by crime or violence, groups may formulate theories that allege certain out-groups are conspiring against the in-group. Victimhood tends to generate its own moral framework, which legitimizes the actions and potential revenge of the victims. It also encourages the victim to identify scapegoats and attribute blame to them. Scapegoating solidifies the identity of an enemy and their negative characteristics, helping victims avoid feelings of ambiguity or moral doubt. (Tepeli & Demirok, 2014; Parlak & Uz, 2015). Recep Tayyip Erdogan's populism has effectively utilized scapegoating and conspiracy theories to achieve his goals (Yabanci, 2016).

Narratives of victimhood play a pivotal role within Turkey's national discourse, yet the absence of dialogue about its diverse victimhood narratives presents a notable gap in Turkish political history research. Accordingly, the inadequate analysis of various victimhood claims has hindered a thorough understanding of the AKP's recent authoritarian shift. Existing literature tends to perceive the AKP's current victimhood discourse as a continuum of earlier Islamist victimhood narratives, overlooking its evolution which has seen the addition of two additional layers. These new layers, 'national victimhood discourse/victimhood nationalism' and 'manufactured victimhood', have helped create a distinct form of victimhood prevalent in contemporary Turkey.

This paper primarily examines the AKP's use of victimhood discourses since 2002. Initially, these discourses gained momentum following tangible events such as 'the February 28 post-modern coup process,' headscarf ban, and discrimination against minorities. However, with the AKP's third election victory and Gezi Park protests in 2013 (which led to anti-government mobilization), the party shifted to manufacturing victimhood narratives and employing anti-Western conspiracy theories to deflect failures. This manufactured victimhood, now centralized in official discourse and campaigning, aided in contradicting and distancing the party from its true status as the dominant national power. This paper highlights a shift from genuine to manufactured victimhood discourses by first exploring the historical development of victimhood in Turkey, then delving into its discursive evolution and its impact on Turkish politics.

The Vertical and Horizontal Dimension of Erdogan's Populism

Numerous scholars concur that populism constitutes a distinct set of core ideas, often referred to as a thin ideology, rather than a comprehensive belief system with explicit guidelines addressing social, political, and economic issues, such as liberalism, social democracy, and communism. This thin ideology revolves around two central elements: (i) the antagonism between 'the pure people' and the elites, and (ii) the moral and normative supremacy of popular will (Mudde, 2004: 543). Populists interpret the concept of 'the people' in a manner that aligns with their political agenda. They assert that it is they alone that can represent the people against a perceived 'corrupt' elite seeking to exclude them from power. It's important to note that this 'unified and virtuous people' represents an exclusionary political project and does not encompass the entire population of a given country (Lefort, 1988).

Populism manifests itself in two dimensions: vertical and horizontal (Taguieff, 1995: 32-35). The vertical dimension revolves around a binary of the 'pure people' versus the 'corrupt, evil elite', while the horizontal dimension involves a binary opposition between insiders and outsiders. The outsiders, who curiously may be citizens, are nevertheless perceived as foreigners or internal enemies based on their identities (Taguieff, 1995: 32-35). Within the 'people,' there exists a distinction between 'people like us' and those outside 'our' group, who are seen as threats to 'our' way of life. Across various political and social contexts, populism tends to designate certain out-groups, such as minorities, migrants, dissidents, and opposition parties and politicians, as scapegoats. In this regard, populism adopts a Manichean perspective, dividing society into opposing poles of 'us' versus 'them,' or 'friends' versus 'enemies.' (Mudde, 2004: 543).

A recent study (Lewis et al., 2019) highlighted that Erdogan is the only right-wing leader who can be labelled as being 'very populist.' Since working in the National Outlook (Milli Gorus) years during the 1970s and 1980s, Erdogan's worldview consistently featured Islamist populist elements, framing himself and practicing Muslims as the true owners of the homeland, who had been victims of the oppressive Kemalist establishment. Erdogan's populism has intensified significantly in recent years and has become a core feature of his political narrative (Yilmaz & Bashirov, 2018). This intensification was particularly noticeable following key political moments such as the nation's economic challenges in 2009 and the Gezi protests in 2013. Post-Gezi, Erdogan's populism merged with a revived Islamist ideology, marked by strong anti-Western rhetoric and conspiracy theories (Yilmaz & Bashirov, 2018). This ideological shift is rooted in former Prime Minister's Erbakan's National Outlook Islamism and the totalitarian ideology of Erdogan's influential role model, Necip Fazil Kısakurek. Together, these elements provide a strong religio-moral component, asserting that 'the people' they represent include not only those who were exploited, excluded, oppressed, and victimized but also practicing Muslims who are regarded as morally superior (Tugal, 2002).

In Erdoğan's populist vision, the Kemalist elite, along with non-Kemalist secular Turks—including leftists, liberals, democrats, and many urban-educated individuals—constitutes the vertical dimension of populism. These are often portrayed as 'elites' (referred to as Beyaz Turkler or White Turks) who are perceived as disconnected from the 'real' and authentic values of 'the people.' They are frequently caricatured as sipping whisky by the Bosphorus while the 'real Turks' endure hardships. They are typically accused of imposing historical traumas on ordinary people in the name of Westernization or progress. Turkish-Islamist media intellectuals have particularly popularized the pejorative figure of the White Turk, depicting them as arrogant, elitist, and anti-Islamist. The White Turk is constructed as someone who views practicing Muslims as provincial, lower class, and ignorant to define their own (secular, civilized, and Westernized) identity and justify their authority. In the Erdoganist narrative, the White Turks are held responsible for any issues in the country, with the specter of the past Kemalist regime playing a crucial role in illustrating the potential consequences for 'the people' if Erdogan were to lose power (Yilmaz, 2021).

The horizontal dimension is also significant in Erdogan's populism, and his policies aimed at fostering a pious in-group. This is particularly the case in the recent manifestation of victimhood, which poses that the AKP, Erdogan and the in-group are being threatened and attacked by a range of conspiring internal and external enemies. Alevis, Kurds, Armenians, Jews, liberals, and notably, the Gulen movement became targets within this resurrected discourse, fueling the 'resentment/revenge of the Sunni constituency against the Westernized elite and citizens practicing a Western lifestyle, perceived as responsible for the banishment of religion itself' (Yilmaz et al., 2023).

Erdoganist Victimhood and Resentment: Kemalists as the Oppressors

Turkish victimhood discourse has been shaped by several key narrative themes. These themes provide shape to claims of victimhood by describing who the oppressors are, who is being threatened (victimized), and how historical, political or other contextual factors

justify and legitimize these narratives.

Turkish victimhood has a long history in the national political arena and there is a degree of continuity between earlier Islamist victimhood, Kemalist victimhood and contemporary Erdoganist victimhood. The insecurities, anxieties, and fears within Erdoganism bear a striking resemblance to those found in Kemalism. Much like their Kemalist counterparts, Turkey's Islamists harbor their own insecurities, feelings of victimhood, fears, and a siege mentality towards the West. They attribute the decline of revered institutions, namely the Ottoman Empire and the Caliphate, to the West, as documented by Akkoyunlu and Oktem (2016: 510). However, in the Islamist and Erdoganist narrative, Kemalists are viewed as products of Western cultural imperialism—self-colonizing pawns of the godless West fixated on eroding Turkey's Islamic identity and threatening its Muslim population (Akkoyunlu & Oktem, 2016: 510). Thus, Erdogan's populism finds its roots in Turkish Islamist victimhood. It positions itself against the Kemalist hegemony by purporting to represent the demands, interests, victimhood, resentments, and frustrations of practicing Muslims, whom Erdogan frames as the true owners of the country. In this context, the potential for democratization of Turkey only exists if democracy is conceived as the 'power of the people' or 'popular sovereignty' (Yilmaz, 2021).

Historically, victimhood discourses have held a central place in Islamist ideology in Turkey. The Turkish Islamist victimhood discourse argues that Islamists have been the true victims of the modernization process in Turkey (Yilmaz Z., 2017: 483). At the core of the Turkish Islamist victimhood narrative lies the transformative events of 1923, involving the destruction of the Ottoman State and the establishment of the secular Republic. Kemalist reforms in education, social interactions, and politics dealt a severe blow to the status and wealth of the Islamic establishment.

Consequently, the Kemalists, particularly represented by the Republican People Party (CHP) in political life, became the primary oppressor and threat in Turkish Islamist victimhood discourse. The persecution of leading Islamist intellectuals like Necip Fazil Kısakurek, Said Nursi, and Sezai Karakoc, made possible by new laws, generated deep resentment and disillusionment among intellectuals and their followers toward the existing political order in Turkey. These intellectuals perceived themselves as "alienated in their own country," forced into "estrangement," and cast as "pariahs" (Aktay, 2003; see also Singer, 2013). In this Islamist imagination, the history of modern Turkey is entirely framed as the "victimhood of devout Muslims" (Yilmaz Z., 2017: 87).

The Kemalist animosity towards Islamists during the Kemalist decades, exemplified by the Constitutional Court's frequent closure of Erbakan's political parties, the "Republican Rally" in 2007, headscarf bans at universities, and continuous demonization of Islamist figures in the media, served to solidify Islamists' perception of Kemalists as adversaries. This has cultivated a sense of "resentment and victimhood" among Islamists (Yilmaz Z., 2017).

The conspiratorial anxieties and resentments of pro-Erdoganists related to the authoritarian secularism of Kemalism were not entirely unfounded. However, Erdogan's

martyrdom has resonated within Islamic cultures, serving as a powerful symbol to unite and galvanize communities. In modern times, however, martyrdom has been popularized primarily by violent Islamic groups in their armed struggles at both local and global levels, often within a jihadist framework. This contemporary use emphasizes the sacrifice of the self, devaluing life while highlighting the rewards of the afterlife. Understanding its significance within Islamic faith, alongside its current pro-Sharia and jihadi associations (Yilmaz, 2019a; 2019b; 2021b; Yilmaz et al., 2023), is crucial to grasping its utilization by AKP politicians in Turkey, given their historically close ideological and organic ties with these movements (See Erturk, 2002; 2023). Politicians in Turkey, aware of the emotional and ideological power of martyrdom, have strategically harnessed its symbolism to reinforce their narratives, influence public opinion and attack the opposition (Yilmaz & Shipoli, 2022). This practice intertwines religious sentiments with political aims, leveraging the reverence for martyrs within society to consolidate power and garner support.

Necropolitical Use of Martyrdom by the AKP and Popularization of Death

Necropolitics, as defined by Mbembe (2003; 2019), refers to the sovereign's authority to control both the lives and deaths of individuals, encompassing the power to decide who lives and who dies. This concept has found application in various contexts, notably within the Turkish landscape, as described in works by Ahmetbeyzade (2008), Bargu (2016; 2019), Zengin (2016), and Islekel (2017). These contributions have broadened the understanding of necropolitics, introducing novel dimensions that demonstrate its complexity and influence in contemporary political landscapes (Bargu, 2019: 5-6). Within the realm of Turkish politics, the AKP has strategically harnessed martyrdom narratives, employing them as powerful tools that normalize and celebrate death when the deaths are perceived or explained as being on behalf of the masses (Carney, 2018; Bakiner, 2019; Yilmaz & Erturk, 2021a; 2021b; 2023). In the AKP's discursive and representational necropolitics, the notion of death for the nation - epitomized through martyrdom - is elevated to a fetishized status (Carney, 2018: 94, 101). This fusion of necropolitical discourse with martyrdom narratives by the AKP indicates a calculated effort to both celebrate and sanctify the notion of death, evoking profound emotional responses within the populace, and intertwining cases of death with nationalist and religious fervor.

The Evolution of Martyrdom and Its Contemporary Application by the AKP

The concept of martyrdom has a rich etymological and cultural history, with roots that trace back to the Greek word "martus" or "martyr," meaning "witness." While the term initially held a broader significance, it gradually acquired a religious connotation, coming to represent the act of sacrificing one's life for God, especially within Christianity and Judaism (Freamon, 2003: 319). In the Islamic tradition, this concept is mirrored by the Arabic term "shahadah," which also translates to "to witness." The individual who carries out this act is known as a "shahid," a title bestowed not just in Arabic but in many non-Arab Muslim societies as well (Hatina, 2014: 19). This evolution of the term across linguistic and religious boundaries highlights the profound and universal significance of martyrdom as a symbol of ultimate commitment to faith and principles.

discourse successfully manipulated these anxieties, fears, and resentments and leveraged them in sweeping narratives of the threat they posed to the fate of the nation and, more broadly, to the Muslim world. These narratives gained intense traction following the Gezi

Protests in 2013 and, most prominently, the 2016 coup attempt. In Turkey's current socio-political climate, even the slightest criticism is now framed as a terrorist activity masterminded by external enemies determined to destroy Turkey, Islam, and the Muslim World.

Islamist Civilizational Populism: Framing the EU and West as Civilizational Enemies

While civilizationism has been interpreted as a form of nationalism, the boundaries of belonging and the semantics of 'self' and 'other' undergo a reconceptualization when framed in civilizational terms. This perspective presents an alternative to nationalism, wherein the imagined community or nostalgic utopia is situated at a different level of cultural and political space compared to national discourse. It's crucial to note that civilizationism doesn't replace nationalism; instead, it becomes intertwined with nationalism (Brubaker, 2017: 1211).

'Civilizational populism' (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022; 2023) is defined as a set of ideas that asserts politics should reflect the "*volonté générale*" (general will) of the people. It posits that society is divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: 'the people' and 'the corrupt elite,' who collaborate with dangerous outsiders from other civilizations. These outsiders are portrayed as hostile and a direct threat to the people's civilization and way of life (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022; 2023).

A civilisational populist perspective became prevalent in AKP politics following the decline of pro-European Union (EU) reforms and a weakening of ties with the EU. Firstly, it moved away from the prioritization of Westernization and relations-building with the West but, more significantly, it also placed a civilizational perspective at the core of Turkey's interactions with the EU. This perspective framed Islamic civilization as being fundamentally opposed to Western civilization (Bashirov & Yilmaz, 2020: 173-175).

The AKP's Islamist victimhood narrative portrays a vision of a united Muslim world (the Ummah) threatened by conspiracies orchestrated by "the Crusader West." This narrative not only designates the ruling Islamist regime as a victim but also frames Turkey as a nation and country under threat. The concept of Islamist victimhood enables the AKP to present itself simultaneously as a target of Western conspiracies and as the foremost defender of Turkey and the entire Muslim world against these perceived conspiracies. This has led to the AKP adopting a transactionalist foreign policy approach towards the EU, stripping away the former ideational or identity-related significance of Turkey-EU relations (Bashirov & Yilmaz, 2020: 173-175).

The Arab Spring also presented a crucial opportunity for the AKP, as it offered hope regarding the fall of pro-Western authoritarian regimes, allowing Islamist forces to rise

and potentially restore Islamic national identities. In response to the Arab Spring, the AKP identified a strategic window and began defining its civilizational identity in starkly anti-Western terms. This move aimed to address and appeal to anxieties, insecurities, and fears regarding Western retaliation. The AKP embraced its civilizational discourse more vehemently, categorizing the West and Islam as mutually exclusive and antagonistic enemies. Erdogan and his party increasingly employed a civilizational discourse that depicted Turkey as an exclusively Muslim nation. While presenting themselves and their supporters (AKP voters) as native and national, they categorized other political classes and their constituents as non-native due to their allegedly "alien" Western paradigms. Simultaneously, anti-Westernism escalated, with the AKP denouncing the EU/West for undermining Turkey's alleged rise under AKP rule.

Religio-nationalist Victimhood

Another layer of the AKP's victimhood discourse converges with the Kemalist national victimhood discourse that portrays Turkey as the prime target of Western powers and their local collaborators. The notion of a national victimhood discourse is deeply ingrained in the Turkish national psyche, emphasizing collective victimhood experienced by the Turkish people, especially at the hands of Western imperialist forces. This narrative, rooted in events dating back to 1908 and exacerbated during WWI, is also propagated through institutional mechanisms like the national curriculum.

Central to Turkey's victimhood nationalism is what has been termed the Sevres Syndrome – a collective victimhood and siege mentality with roots in the signing of the Treaty of Sevres in 1920. This treaty marked the gradual and tumultuous collapse of the Ottoman State. Over time, the memory of this treaty and its associated fears and losses metamorphosed into Sevres Syndrome, giving rise to numerous anti-Western conspiracy theories grounded in nationalism and anti-imperialism. Scholars suggest that the perception of unique in-group victimhood, such as that developed in the Sevres Syndrome, often solidifies national identities, fostering a siege mentality in which certain nations perceive the world as inherently against them.

Both the late Ottoman Empire and the early Turkish Republic grappled with the need to rationalize their defeats and challenges, resorting to a narrative involving external forces and internal adversaries. In the late Ottoman Empire, adversaries included Greece, Armenia, Russia, and the UK. Over time, this narrative evolved to include Kurds, Jews, communists, and Christians as victims of an enduring demonization campaign. Despite changing actors, the narrative has remained fundamentally consistent. Identifying enemies and incorporating conspiracy theories has become an ingrained aspect of the collective mindset, observed among both secularist and Islamist factions within Turkish society (Yilmaz, 2021).

National Victimhood Discourse

Interpreting the world through the narrative lens described above provides both secular and Muslim Turks with a framework that absolves them from extending empathy to other

victimized groups, such as the Armenians. Combined with the Sevres Syndrome, it also allows them to present themselves unequivocally as the true victims of historical events. For instance, rather than confronting the reality of the Armenian Genocide, the Turkish state projected Turks as historical victims, portraying them as targets of both murderous Armenians and the depredations of imperial powers. This framework is what we term the national victimhood discourse.

The national victimhood discourse has typically been (ab)used by the ruling elite within Turkish politics. This stands in contrast to the Turkish Islamist victimhood narrative, which emerged as an oppositional underdog narrative. The distinction lies in the requirement of victimhood nationalism for the claimant to represent both the nation and the state, necessitating a position of power to do so. The nation and state are the primary targets of victimization in this context, diverging from Turkish Islamist victimhood, where Islamists and their conservative constituents are the focus. Consequently, those invoking Turkish Islamist victimhood should ideally only speak on behalf of these particular segments.

Victimhood Narratives – and Their Evolution - During the AKP’s Rising Hegemony

The discussion above briefly outlined the key actors held responsible in AKP’s victimhood discourse, and the key influential factors that have shaped its narratives. In the following section, the content of these narratives and their evolution will be analyzed, investigating the initial articulations of victimization which were primarily in response to various socio-political and historical events. It will then examine their transformation and adoption of manufactured narratives and an increased reliance on conspiracy theories, which have been necessary to maintain a victimhood status—even as the AKP has become the most powerful hegemon in contemporary Turkey.

The evolution of the AKP’s contemporary victimhood narrative is marked by the integration of victimhoods associated with religio-nationalism, Turkish nationalism and Islamist populism. The party positions itself as a victimized yet conversely hegemonic entity speaking on behalf of the entire nation and, in an imagined sense, the Ummah. The contemporary manifestation of their claim to victimhood goes beyond these components to encompass an additional discursive layer of manufactured victimhood.

The AKP’s narrative of victimhood persists despite governing the country for twenty-one uninterrupted years and having acquired extensive political powers. When faced with challenges like economic downturns due to its policies or evidence of corruption, the party resorts to blaming external entities, such as foreign forces or interest lobbies, deflecting responsibility.

Initial Era of Victimhood Narratives: Predominantly Anti-Kemalist

The AKP’s rise to power in the 2002 general elections marked a significant departure from the long-standing dominance of Kemalists in Turkish politics. Utilizing the discontent of pious Muslims and broader dissatisfaction stemming from economic challenges, the AKP employed a potent populist discourse that perpetuated the belief that

the majority were victims of the established order.

In the early 2000s, the AKP successfully portrayed itself as the victim of the 'White Turks,' referencing the Kemalist hegemony and military tutelage that discriminated against conservative segments of society. Turkish Islamists described themselves as the 'Black Turks' (Bilici, 2009; Demiralp, 2012; Arat-Koc, 2018), claiming to have endured oppression at the hands of the Kemalist hegemony since the establishment of the Republic. In constructing this opposition (Black Turks vs White Turks), the AKP was able to portray themselves as the voice of the Black Turks. Erdogan consistently asserted his identity as a 'Black Turk,' for instance stating on one occasion, "In this country, there is a segregation of Black Turks and White Turks. Your brother Tayyip belongs to the Black Turks." On another occasion, he expressed, "I am honored to be a Black Turk" (Sabah, 2015).

During its two initial terms, the AKP's victimhood discourses effectively highlighted Kemalist-era policies, including the February 28, 1997 "post-modern coup," the headscarf ban, and discrimination in bureaucratic and military sectors. This political period saw a distancing from overtly Islamist victimhood references, and it was during this time that Erdogan famously stated the party had shed the garment of Islamism.

In its initial phase of governance, the AKP maintained a pro-Western stance while focusing on its primary objective of challenging the Kemalist establishment. The primary resentment of Turkish-Islamist subjects was initially directed at White Turks, Kemalist elites, and CHP cadres. It persistently asserted that its struggle against the establishment was fundamentally a fight for democracy and human rights—a strategic move, considering the fate of its predecessors. The victimization under the Kemalist regime extended beyond conservative Muslims, encompassing Kurds, Alevis, non-Muslims, liberals, and socialists to varying degrees throughout the Republican period.

Around the turn of the millennium, especially within the context of a military tutelage system, it became evident that a broader community needed to unite around a general democratization agenda. This unity was crucial for the AKP to address specific demands and gain power, resulting in the AKP and various victimized segments of society becoming mutually dependent in challenging the Kemalist tutelage regime. To garner support and demonstrate inclusivity, the AKP invited a broad spectrum of political actors, predominantly from center-right and liberal backgrounds, to participate in the party's decision-making processes. Their narratives of Turkish victimhood incorporated discourses addressing long-standing issues faced by minorities under the Kemalist reign (Acikel, 1996; Demiralp, 2012; Yılmaz Z., 2017; Grigoriadis & Dilek, 2018). This discursive period of victimhood was grounded in real events and did not rely on conspiracy theories.

Aligning with its conservative democratic discourse, the AKP did not focus solely on expressing Muslim resentment but sought to empathize with other victimhood narratives and attempted to build a coalition among various marginalized groups. The party collaborated with actors such as the Gulen movement, religious Kurds, some Alevis, and the liberal democratic segments of society. These groups consistently supported the AKP,

at least until the Gezi events in 2013, and benefited from the opportunity structures that emerged following the AKP's election in 2002

Articulating Narratives of Human Rights Abuses

The AKP government responded to the demands of their coalition of victims by implementing reforms aimed at safeguarding human rights, especially in minority affairs. Between 2004 and 2013, significant openings were created in response to non-Muslim, Kurdish, and Alevi issues. Erdogan – the leader of this coalition of victims – opportunistically attempted to redirect the resentments of the non-Muslims, Kurds and Alevis toward blame attribution towards the CHP and Kemalism.

The AKP strategically anchored its victimhood claims in human rights discourses during the pre-Gezi period. Articulations of human rights (and human rights abuses) became a crucial tool for the AKP to assert and maintain its victimhood status. In a domestic political context, human rights arguments can be powerful in evoking a sense of 'victimhood,' portraying the state as an all-encompassing hegemon inflicting pain on less powerful groups. The AKP effectively utilized this argument, leveraging the balance of power in Turkish politics and events under the Kemalist regime, such as party closure cases, the headscarf ban, Erdogan's short-term imprisonment, and the military's rejection of Abdullah Gul's presidential election due to his wife's headscarf, which lent legitimacy to their rhetoric (Grigoriadis & Dilek, 2018: 299).

Victimhood Claims Taking on New Dimensions in Response to Key Political Events

In the pre-Gezi period, Turkish Islamist victimhood was primarily domestic, focusing on its underdog status against the Kemalists. However, the government response to the 2013 Gezi protests marked a significant departure from the predominantly anti-Kemalist and victimhood narratives that the AKP had been disseminating since coming into power. Erdogan perceived and presented the Gezi protests as a severe threat to his personal power, prompting a desperate need for new rhetoric to counter the peaceful civil protests. As Kemalist-centric victimhood narratives lost appeal, the AKP sought a new political discourse to reassert its victimhood status. During the Gezi protests, Erdogan resorted to civilisationist Islamist rhetoric, portraying not only the government but Turkey in its entirety as a victim of an international conspiracy orchestrated by the West and its local allies. This narrative amalgamated elements of 'national victimhood discourse' and 'Turkish Islamist victimhood' and positioned itself as a perpetual victim of various groups, countries, and interests, including Germany, the US, the UK, and media outlets Otpor! and CNN. The AKP also deployed a discourse of needing to protect itself and the ummah against imaginary enemies, including the 'supreme intelligence,' 'interest rate lobbies,' and foreign adversaries (Yilmaz, 2021).

In the same year as the Gezi Protests, the 2013 military coup in Egypt against the Muslim Brotherhood-supported presidency of Mohammad Morsi dealt both a geopolitical and psychological blow to the AKP leadership (Akkoyunlu & Oktem, 2016: 518). The fall of a crucial Islamist ally and the imprisonment of its elected leader undermined the AKP's regional aspirations, contributing to a deeper level of insecurity and an alarmist reading

of domestic and regional dynamics. Importantly, the event validated Turkish Islamist's deep mistrust and resentment towards the West. They perceived the muted response of Western media and governments to the coup, compared to the extensive attention given to the Gezi Protests, and the swift endorsement of the military-backed regime in Egypt, as proof of its double standards regarding democracy in the Muslim world (Akkoyunlu & Oktem, 2016: 518).

The controversial coup attempt on July 15, 2016, was also a traumatizing event for millions of Erdoganists (Adisonmez & Onursal, 2020: 298). Erdogan adeptly turned the failed coup attempt into an extraordinary source of popular support, using the event as a rallying and mobilizing opportunity. More importantly, he gained the unwavering support of conservative religious and nationalist segments of society by articulating a discourse that instilled fear and anxiety, portraying all opposition and criticism as detrimental to their interests, lifestyles, and even to their existence (Ozen, 2020: 1-3). He consistently used a discourse of securitization to maintain this anxiety and fear, framing opposition to his government as an attack against Islam, the nation's unity, the flag, and all sacred national values.

Islamist Populism and Historical Islamist Victimhood

The political events detailed in the previous section have contributed significantly to the victimhood narratives propagated by Erdogan and the AKP. Although these events intersect with religious populism, there is also a distinct layer of victimhood that stems directly from Islamism and historical Islamist victimhood and addresses the perceived victimization of Muslims at the hands of various oppressors. Victimhood accounts within Turkish Islamism assert that Islamists have been the true casualties of Turkey's modernization process, with a particular focus on the demise of the Ottoman State and the subsequent establishment of the secular Republic in 1923. Islamist populism plays a significant role in shaping AKP's key narratives about friends and foes, and victims and victimizers. It has also allowed Erdogan and his party to create a victimhood discourse that connects to broader and transnational Muslim victimhood themes and narratives.

Turkish Islamist victimhood is rooted in historical experiences of victimization, stretching back to the early Republican period and, for the AKP, encompassing party closures, military coups, detainment, and headscarf bans. At the core of this victimhood narrative lies the profound impact of secular Kemalist reforms in education, social structures, and politics, which dealt a severe blow to the prior status and wealth of the Islamic establishment. The oversight of all religious education and preaching was centralized under the state-affiliated Diyanet, and numerous religious institutions, including dervish lodges and Islamic charities, were prohibited or abolished. The new Turkish Criminal Code criminalized almost all forms of non-state (non-Diyanet) religious dissemination, leading to the persecution of various religious groups.

While certain historical events during the Kemalist era did disadvantage Islamists, the core of Islamist 'victimhood' in the Turkish case is primarily grounded in an 'imaginary' context. The articulation of these victimizations powerfully combines factual events with imaginary elements. This blending serves to amplify and sanctify their significance,

contributing to narratives of victimhood that resonate emotionally and symbolically within the broader Islamist community. Within this Islamist imagination, modern Turkish history is framed as witnessing the 'victimhood of devout Muslims.' This framing is deeply embedded within the political imagination of Islamists, existing in a realm where the boundaries between reality and fiction are blurred, and encompasses material practices, emotions, symbolic efficacy, performances, and dramatizations.

Although neither the AKP nor Turkey are officially the leader of the Muslim world, the Turkish Islamist imaginary envisions them as such (Cinar, 2018; Sezal & Sezal, 2017). Consequently, attacks against Turkish Islamists are portrayed as direct attacks against the Muslim world. President Erdogan, considered by many as the 'heir presumptive' of the caliphate and the leader of the Muslim world, plays a central role in legitimizing and disseminating this idea. In his famous balcony speeches following election victories, Erdogan claimed "Sarajevo won today as much as Istanbul. Beirut won as much as Izmir. Damascus won as much as Ankara. Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, the West Bank, [and] Jerusalem won as much as Diyarbakir" (Phillips, 2017: 29). This suggests that his political victory in Turkey is a success for all Muslim lands. In this narrative, even minor losses for the AKP are construed as significant blows to the Muslim world.

Transitioning to a Manufactured Victimhood

While Turkish Islamist victimhood encompasses both real and imagined accounts of events, it is important to note that this perception is not necessarily deliberate. It is a product of how Islamists interpret their political environment. In contrast, manufactured victimhood strategically combines the imagined Turkish Islamist victimhood with deliberately constructed falsehoods. Unlike Turkish Islamist and nationalist victimhood narratives, which originate from real events and their dramatizations, manufactured victimhood deliberately fabricates narratives—often in stark contradiction to the AKP's hegemonic status—to create a sense of victimhood where none exists.

Despite the persuasiveness of the AKP's victimhood claims, during its first decade in power, its overreliance on them eventually took its toll. Since their 2011 election victory, the AKP's own supporters found it difficult to consolidate victimhood narratives that claimed the party was an underdog in Turkish politics. Regardless, even in 2014, the AKP continued to depict itself "as the oppressed blacks" and "eternal underdogs of Turkish society" (Yilmaz, 2021). Eventually, though, AKP's Islamist victimhood vis-à-vis the Kemalists, which relied on human rights discourses, ceased to yield favorable political results.

The persuasiveness of this messaging took an even steeper dive after 2016, when the AKP became the nation's primary hegemonic power in Turkish politics and succeeded in marginalizing the Kemalist tutelage (Yilmaz & Bashirov, 2018). At this juncture, the AKP needed a new 'anchor' to re-establish itself as a victim, which it found in anti-Western conspiracy theories. The AKP no longer required the support of the EU, as the pressure for democratization, anti-corruption measures, and transparency had become burdensome. By this point, the AKP deemed transactional relations with the EU to be sufficient (for a detailed analysis, see Bashirov & Yilmaz, 2020).

It was during this time that the AKP's victimhood acquired more imaginary dimensions, and the party began constructing an imaginary victimhood narrative combined with Islamist civilizationism. These narratives rely on perpetuating anti-Western conspiracy theories to rationalize its problems, failures, and inefficiencies. This narrative shift allows the AKP to deflect criticism, attribute internal challenges to external actors, and maintain a sense of being besieged, despite holding significant political power. For the AKP, the West became a convenient rhetorical foil against which it sought to define the struggle of the faithful and the "national will" (Hoffman et al., 2018: 5).

Erdogan played a crucial role in creating momentum for this discursive shift in victimhood. As the leader acquired significant power, he shifted blame away from himself, propagated the belief that the AKP was being threatened or attacked by internal and external enemies, and disseminated securitization narratives (Lancaster, 2014: 1684). These narratives became more entrenched in the years that followed. For instance, on July 21, 2020, while reflecting on the second anniversary of the new presidential system, he passionately declared: *"The Turkish nation and the Republic of Turkey are undergoing a historical period. In this period, there are all kinds of traps, attacks, conspiracies, betrayal, pain, and trouble. The Turkish Nation, with its citizens and security forces, is carrying out its struggle for independence and future, step by step to victory. We are determined to continue this struggle forever for the future of all our friends and brothers (the Muslim World) ... Yes, we, as a nation that shed our sweat and blood, when necessary, believe that we will be gifted with God's good tidings. We are well aware that the attacks that we have been experiencing for the last 7 years have aimed at our belief, history, culture, unity, togetherness, ezan (call to prayer), flag, and all our sacred values. We have no doubt that from the turmoil in the streets to the coup attempts, each attack meant shotgun shots for the same target. Our nation with its wisdom acquired through a thousand years of experience has seen this reality and has decided to join the ranks of its future and independence. It is our duty to pay our debt against this sacrifice of our nation by working with sacrifice, diligence and perseverance that will spoil all the conspiracies"* (Erdogan, 2020: 2, 7).

Manufactured victimhood encompasses multiple layers, incorporating not only its own manufactured narratives but also elements of Turkish Islamist and nationalist victimhood. Major events like the Gezi Protests and the attempted coup illustrate the utilization of all three layers within different arguments presented by the AKP. This multifaceted approach serves to perpetuate the victimhood narrative, projecting the party as simultaneously oppressed despite wielding significant power. The strategic use of manufactured victimhood allows the AKP to shape public perception, maintain a sense of solidarity among its supporters, and deflect attention from internal challenges or criticisms.

The above discussion highlights how the AKP's strategic move to adopt anti-Western conspiracy theories navigates the changing dynamics of Turkish politics. This new narrative angle resonates with a segment of its support base, explaining economic challenges, international scrutiny, and internal dissent. This new narrative anchor helps sustain victimhood rhetoric, even as the AKP's political landscape and power dynamics

undergo significant transformations.

Conclusion

To trace the trajectory of the AKP's discourse of victimhood, it is essential to first acknowledge its roots in the broader historical context of Turkish Islamist ideology. For decades, Islamist discourse depicted its adherents as the oppressed 'Black Turks,' enduring discrimination under Kemalist rule since the Republic's founding. Discriminatory practices in public service recruitment, the disapproval of conservative traditions by Kemalist leaders, and pivotal events like the February 28 process, the headscarf ban, and Erdogan's imprisonment collectively fueled and solidified the Islamist victimhood narrative by the turn of the millennium.

The AKP's electoral triumphs have been intricately linked to the strategic deployment of victimhood discourses, casting its opposition as antagonists while presenting the party and its support base as victims. Initially directed at Kemalists, particularly the main opposition CHP, the AKP's victimhood narrative evolved into a multi-layered framework post-Gezi, seamlessly and concurrently adopting anti-Western conspiracy theories. Notably, the party expanded its narratives of victimization beyond domestic boundaries, aligning its fate with the Muslim Ummah and employing victimhood to legitimize crackdowns on domestic opposition. This narrative shielded the AKP from criticism and effectively stifled dissent, especially in the face of corruption scandals.

An intriguing aspect of the AKP's narrative is its dual portrayal, presenting itself as a domestic hegemon and protector of the nation, while simultaneously depicting itself as an underdog and target in global politics against the West. The adept utilization of conspiracy theories is an attempt to maintain the AKP's image as the sole representative of Turkey and casting the West as an omnipotent hegemon in the geopolitical arena.

The multifaceted functions of victimhood claims within the political sphere are evident in the AKP's narrative. Pre-Gezi, victimhood, coupled with human rights discourse, bolstered the AKP's moral standing against Kemalists and the West. This narrative not only resonated with the conservative masses but also justified the party's crackdowns on opposition, both internally and externally. The narrative's evolution into an internationalized victimhood, seamlessly merging historical grievances with contemporary political maneuvering, showcases the adaptability and resilience of the AKP's discursive strategy within the ever-shifting landscape of Turkish politics.

The political benefits of claiming victimhood—providing moral superiority, absolving guilt and shame, justifying misdeeds, enabling unfair behavior, and evading responsibility—is evident in the political sphere, as seen in the AKP's narrative.

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