

Electoral Consolidation Through Islamic Populism and Religious Grievance: The Case of Transformation of Hagia Sophia in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

The transformation of Hagia Sophia into a mosque in 2020 has been one of the major topics of public debate in Turkey. Based on the literature on populism and the role of emotions in politics, this paper analyzes the case of Hagia Sophia by suggesting a split from economy-based explanations of populism. It is argued that the case of the transformation of Hagia Sophia as a populist maneuver can be analyzed through historical context that shapes and affects the emotion of religious grievance in contemporary Turkey. This paper discusses how the AKP and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan operationalize the case of the transformation of Hagia Sophia through religious grievances as a populist discourse to establish electoral consolidation in the wake of two large-scale crises.

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Introduction

In the populism literature, there is a strong inclination toward economic explanations, as seen by the dominance of the “losers of modernization” theory the driving force for populist votes is the economic hardships people face in the face of globalization, modernization, automation, and technological advances in the working sphere. However, the explanation does not explain fully the case of Turkey. Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) came to power in 2002, and its selling point was to represent the silenced religious segment.

Islamic intelligentsia of Turkey perceived the foundational period of the Republic as a suppression period of Islam in all spheres of life and matched Kemalist ideology with oppression and exclusion of religious parts of the society, and they emphasized that Kemalist hegemony discriminates, and restrains opportunities, upward mobilities of the Muslim majority (Yılmaz & Bashirov, 2018, p. 1821). Indeed, before the AKP took power there was a bias both in social and political life against people who expressed their religious beliefs, these oppressions were sometimes systematic, for example, women who wore headscarves could not attend university and hold public jobs while wearing headscarves, this changed when in 2002 the AKP took power and slowly the ban on headscarves was not an issue in practice, the official ban with the leadership of Erdoğan was lifted in 2013.

The religious grievances in Turkey are closely tied to the modernization process of modern Turkey, with the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk there was a rapid and top-down modernization process in the 1920s and onwards, the religious convents and dervish lodges were closed, religious outfits were banned under the laws of hat and appearance and outfit law. These

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rapid changes during the rule of the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP) and the official ideology of Kemalism of that era created a long process of religious grievance among the devoutly religious people in Turkey, there were attempts to integrate Islam into Turkish politics by the National Outlook (*Millî Görüş*) politico-religious movement starting from the 1960s; however, the military tutelage and Kemalist regime closed several Islamist political parties. The AKP was formed by a separation from the Virtue Party, a National Outlook political party, in 2001 and they claimed that the AKP represented a “Muslim democrat” movement by “taking off the National Outlook shirt.”¹

Against this backdrop, it is clear that there is a strained relationship between the secular segment and the devout religious segment, where national events, political developments, and the social sphere are almost like a zero-sum game in the eye of the AKP and its voters. This phenomenon reached its height with the transformation of Hagia Sophia from a museum to a mosque, Hagia Sophia had cultural significance in Turkey when Constantinople was conquered by Mehmed II in 1453 in order to highlight the fact that Istanbul is a Muslim land, Church of Hagia Sophia was turned into a mosque. According to scholars from various subjects Hagia Sophia was categorized as the pinnacle of Byzantine architecture, and it was the largest cathedral in the world for nearly a thousand years since it was built in 537 (Moffett, Fazio & Wodehouse, 2004, p. 149). This is why many tourists from all over the world flock to the center of Istanbul to visit it as a museum. However, all of this changed when Hagia Sophia was transformed into a mosque in July 2020, there was an immediate reaction from the secular segment that Hagia Sophia should remain as a museum and there was a joyous reaction from the devout religious segment that Hagia Sophia was, at last, re-joining with its “ummah”. The importance of this transformation is peculiar in terms of populism, first, there is the definition problem when taking at face value the definition of populism, seeing the society as two camps which are both homogenous and antagonistic, the pure people and the corrupt elites (Mudde, 2007, p. 23), does not capture the essence of both AKP’s trajectory and the reason behind the transformation of Hagia Sophia into a mosque. Second, the literature on economic reasons for populism also does not capture the reason behind this political move, since the decision was made during an economic crisis the move at hand does not follow the blueprint of how a traditional -in a western sense- populist party might behave.

The economic explanation for populism is dominant in the literature, such as in the case of the analysis of the Great Recession (Hernández & Kriesi, 2016, p. 220) or in the explanation of economic grievance and deindustrialization (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, pp. 134-136); however, it is not comprehensive or suitable enough to explain the electoral consolidation of the AKP. Hence, this paper tries to find an alternative approach on the basis of religious grievances to explain this phenomenon. There is also a gap in the literature when presenting the relationship between religion and populism, especially the intersection between religious ideas and emotions in populist mobilization is one of the most understudied fields of the literature (Yılmaz & Morieson, 2021, p. 18). Most of the populism literature often focuses on the juxtaposition of Islam and Christianity, focusing on immigration and Islamophobia issues fueling the support for populist parties and leaders and the social strain that the integration of Muslim people into Christian societies causes. Against this gap in the literature, this research aims to give an answer to whether the case study at hand could be an example of these religious grievances manifesting themselves as an electoral consolidation and aims to provide explanations to be used as a starting point for further research. Therefore, this paper follows the line of this specific research question: Could the emotion of grievance of Sunni-Muslim

¹ A phrase that was frequently used by Erdoğan in early 2000s to underline his change and departure from the National Outlook movement in order to position himself as a “moderate” political figure (Çınar, 2018, p. 137).

majorities in Turkey explain the electoral consolidation of the Turkish Islamic populist party the AKP in the case of the transformation of Hagia Sophia into a mosque in 2020?

This paper tries to bring to light that the economic explanation of populism support is an approach mostly derived from experiences in western countries, and non-western examples, such as Turkey can give further understanding about other possible implications alongside economic explanations. Thus, it is argued that religious grievances constitute one of the most influential variables as an explanation of populist support in Turkey by taking the recent Hagia Sophia Mosque event as a case study to further illuminate the example that even in the face of a looming economic crisis the historic religious grievances between the AKP voters and the opposition voters trumps every other issue and then it is operationalized to garner support for the incumbent party. This paper aims to shed light on the fact that whether the AKP operationalizes Islamic populism by converting Hagia Sophia into a mosque in a way reproducing the elite seculars versus pure devout religious people rhetoric so that it could play into the old religious grievances inherent in Turkish society in an attempt to consolidate its power that has been somewhat shaken due to a long period of economic crisis. Erdoğan's decision as this paper argues was aiming to achieve electoral consolidation in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic and deepening economic crisis, in the next parts of the paper it will be explained that when faced with a looming crisis such as the ongoing economic one, the Islamic populist party AKP went for a route that appeased the religious grievances of its voter base instead of dealing with the economic crisis and follows the trajectory of European populist parties and opts for a protectionist development strategy.

Theoretical Underpinnings

In this section, the concepts of Islamic populism, emotional opportunity structure, and religious grievance will be discussed to establish a concrete conceptual setting to evaluate AKP's decision to transform Hagia Sophia into a mosque.

Islamic Populism

Populism has been a highly debated concept in the literature; questions arise, such as what the definition has to entail, how broad it should be and what type of characteristics it has to include. These contestations led to different subsets of populism in order to better capture the differences and nuances, hence, one of those concepts being Islamic populism. Islamic populism, just as the classic understanding of populism, sees two groups of people in the society; however, what differentiates Islamic populism is the fact that there is a religiosity component. Öztaş (2020, p. 109) argues that there are authoritarian secular elites in Muslim societies, which are made up of devoutly religious people. Islamic populists, therefore, claim that they alone represent the devoutly religious people against the secular elites. According to Taş (2020, p. 2003), Erdoğan and the AKP won the general election by an absolute majority in 2002, and their power rose by the anti-elitist position and victimhood narrative, which portrays the Kemalist regime as oppressors and positions the AKP and Erdoğan as representatives of ostracized groups by the regime. Indeed, Islamic populism explains the AKP's trajectory, the party, and more importantly, Erdoğan constantly referenced and still continues the reference the Kemalist status quo that barred devout religious people in all spheres of life and that he alone is the manifestation of the so-called "oppressed" devoutly religious people in Turkey.

According to Staley (2021, p. 41), one key uniting component of religious populism is racism, this is indeed true for western societies and their understanding of populism. However, the reason this article introduces the concept of Islamic populism is to better study the nuances of this case study. The move made by the AKP government and their whole trajectory is not based on racism, even though the incumbent government has nationalistic properties, the conflict point is not due to race,

and stems from devout religious people versus Kemalist secular elites. Hence, the introduction of the concept of Islamic populism aids in the research of the Hagia Sophia case study because it explains the conflict at hand better than authoritarian and conservative populism.

Emotional Opportunity Structure

In the literature, emotional opportunity structures (EOSs) analysis is mostly utilized for studying social movements (Ruiz-Junco, 2013, p. 50), but Salmela and von Scheve (2018, p. 436-440) utilized the emotional opportunity structure to study the emotions in right-wing and left-wing populism and they find that EOSs are crucial for the formulation and effectiveness of populist rhetoric, and populist parties exploit EOSs through their dependable appeal on certain historical contingencies within specific cultural, social and political contexts. However, their analysis takes the financial crisis of 2008 as an EOS and focuses on recently emerging populist parties and their exploitation of EOS through different strategies in the western political context. However, this paper focuses on a populist party and its leader that has been in power for nearly twenty years and tries to utilize the EOSs framework to understand the possible exploitation strategy of the transformation of Hagia Sophia by a populist party within a specific historical contingency.

Moreover, the resentment analysis of Salmela and von Scheve (2017, p.587) deals with the emergence of this feeling in post-industrial societies in contemporary neoliberal capitalism. Even though Turkey is a relatively suitable example of that type of society, the emergence of resentment through grievances appears within a different social, cultural, and political framework in the context of Hagia Sophia. Rather than triggering effects of macro-level structural changes in the society, such as globalization, the repressed shame of secular reforms during Atatürk's single-party period that was mentioned above, which are perceived as authoritarian and repressive towards the Muslim majority of the society creates an appeal in the emotional opportunity structure for transforming the Hagia Sophia to a mosque. This appeal manifests itself tangibly in the common discourse that was prevalent at the time, which was alluded to in the previous chapters, namely the re-joining of Hagia Sophia with its "ummah." The move to transform Hagia Sophia overlaps with the ongoing pandemic and economic crisis; Erdoğan as the president of Turkey, transformed the political system to increase his administering power over the parliament through a referendum in 2016 and had therefore had the capacity and the chance to transform the Hagia Sophia to a mosque long before July 2020, this wouldn't be out of the ordinary for the regime since overruling decisions of Council of State of Turkey is frequently experienced before and court's autonomy is heavily debatable in the current political system. However, Erdoğan and the AKP decided to transform the Hagia Sophia in the midst of several crises to exploit this emotional opportunity structure to consolidate their voter base.

Religious Grievance

Salmela and von Scheve (2017, p. 587) state that right-wing populist rhetoric targets the fears and insecurities of people in post-industrial societies by mediating between emotional processes and macro-level structural changes and populist rhetoric transforms experienced negative feelings in this context into negative feelings towards out-groups. The feeling of grievance that people experience channelled by populist rhetoric is then used to mobilize for further political aims. Yabancı and Taleski (2017, pp. 300-301) find that populist parties in power both in Turkey and Macedonia use religious references and religious appeal by creating a fusion with their populist rhetoric to utilize dominant religions in both countries as legitimacy and consent-building mechanism for their increasingly authoritarian populism. In the Turkish case, the secular reforms in the single-party era have been perceived as grievances. In a society where the majority of the population is Sunni-Muslim, these secular reforms are seen as an attack on their social identities and are subsequently framed by Islamic populists as a religious grievance and used as an organizational tool.

AKP's populist strategy is based on the "anxieties and grievances of the populace by not only representing the conservative factions but also a number of individuals/ groups who felt rejected by Kemalist principles" (Yılmaz, 2021, p. 4). The conservative, Sunni population is situated as the people, and the Kemalist establishment is situated as the elite. Moreover, Yılmaz (2021, p. 4) identifies the AKP and its predecessor, the National Outlook movement, as the "'black Turks', those who felt excluded by the politics of the 'white Turks.'"

Related to this populist dichotomy, the Hagia Sophia, but nearly all churches in Turkey, have been the ideological battlegrounds. The Turkish authorities transformed other Hagia Sophias in İznik and Trabzon into mosques in previous years and according to Aykaç (2018, p. 152), the religious right-wing and the recent AKP government challenge the "most symbolic achievements of the secular Republic, these transformations are clear manifestations of the current political milieu, highlighting Islam as the major identity of Turkey."

The recent transformation of the Hagia Sophia into a mosque plays on the historical grievances, traumas, and victimhood of the religious right-wing Turks since the end of the Empire (Yılmaz, 2021, p. 11). In other words, the AKP reverses the wrongdoings of the Kemalist establishment and brings justice in the name of "black Turks."

Findings

The study at hand in the following sections will look at the economic crisis and the Hagia Sophia event and will try to put them into a broader context to explain the particularity of the Turkish case in regard to the relationship between religion and populism. In the first part analysis of the economic crisis, the approval rates of AKP, and the support for the Hagia Sophia transformation will be supported by data from the national, trade union, and research company sources. In the second part, the Turkish case will be analyzed through a theoretical framework using the emotional opportunity structure concept. Third, in order to explain the research question, the statements of Erdoğan from the official website of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey will be used and critically assessed.

Operationalization of Religious Grievances and the Economic Crisis

Turkey is going through an unacknowledged economic crisis which was deepened by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic; unemployment is a big issue at the moment; college and higher degree educations do not ensure a stable life, and the looming unemployment has been going on for nearly a decade. Unemployment in Turkey has been steadily increasing since 2014, and according to figures from the official statistical institute, TÜİK (2021), the adjusted unemployment rate is 14,4%, while broad unemployment rates indicate 26,2% in July 2020 (DİSK-AR, 2021, p. 13). The transformation of Hagia Sophia is crucial due to its timing as mentioned in the previous sections, the AKP regime and mainly Erdoğan had the power to do so without resorting to congressional approval for four years; however, AKP's vote rates have been low due to the aforementioned economic crisis, the unemployment issue and the mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic. Rather than opting for economic resolutions, opting for identity politics could be understood as a predictable trajectory for any populist regime. However, what makes this case study and AKP stand apart from that is that instead of focusing on immigrants and adopting a scapegoat strategy like other populist regimes, religious grievances being in the forefront subsequently points to the particularity of the Turkish case and the Hagia Sophia event.

Moreover, the AKP's vote rate reached 39% in September 2020, increasing by 3% (PolitPro, 2021), which constitutes the second peak after the recent peak in the AKP's vote rate in the first months of the coronavirus pandemic. The peak during the pandemic outbreak can be interpreted as the "rally 'round the flag effect" since this effect was also observable in some other countries. However, in the

continuing months, the AKP's vote rate faced a steady decline, but there was a significant increase in September 2020 and experienced another decrease in the continuing months. This period also overlaps with the warm season in Turkey, which led to a reduction in the number of coronavirus cases, and there were some relaxations in coronavirus measurements. However, this upsurge in the AKP's vote in the continuing months after the transformation of Hagia Sophia into a mosque can also be an affirmation from his constituency with a high level of religiosity. Moreover, in the same months, Erdoğan's alliance and as well as the opposition alliance experienced an increase in their vote rates, but "undecided" votes significantly decreased (Türkiye Raporu, 2020a, p. 13). The transformation of Hagia Sophia into a mosque accompanied by populist rhetoric instigated further politicization and polarization within the society. As is seen by the vote increase, the constituencies from various demographic backgrounds as well as the undecided voters, took positions in the face of increasing politicization. These figures show that despite the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and deepening economic crisis with increasing unemployment rates, there was a considerable demand that is related to rooted religious grievances of the devoutly religious segment for the transformation of Hagia Sophia, and Erdoğan utilized that demand opportunity; subsequently, Erdoğan's and the AKP's voter rate experienced upsurges during and after the transformation of Hagia Sophia into a mosque.

Emotional Opportunity Structure and the Transformation of Hagia Sophia Museum

Erdoğan's decision to transform Hagia Sophia into a mosque can be interpreted through the argument of Salmela and von Scheve (2018, p. 449) on feeling resentment in right-wing parties as they argue that right-wing resentment represses other negative feelings and transforms self-emotions into out-group focused feelings of anger and resentment. Erdoğan's decision to transform has strong appeals within the historical contingency on kulturkampf between so-called conservatives (devoutly religious) and seculars within the society and has essential references to the period of the single-party period that is dominated by the Kemalist ideology. Erdoğan commented on the transformation of Hagia Sophia by saying the following:

The resurrection of Hagia Sophia heralds the liberation of the al-Aqsa Mosque. The resurrection of Hagia Sophia is the footsteps of the will of Muslims across the world to come out of the interregnum. The resurrection of Hagia Sophia is the reignition of the fire of hope of not just Muslims, but — together with them — of all the oppressed, wronged, downtrodden and exploited. (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, 2020a)

Here Erdoğan alludes to the Manichean worldview that the devoutly religious segment has felt since the 1920s by calling the transformation a "liberation" and branding Muslims as "oppressed" and "wronged". It is clear that in his speech, Erdoğan is tapping into the religious grievances and frames Hagia Sophia being a museum as a wrongful doing to Muslims by the secular elites and he frames this mentality of elites as an oppressing one, then takes this local oppression and repurposes it to global oppression and highlights the struggles of Muslims everywhere and he alone fixed the situation in his country and lit a candle hope for "all the oppressed" by converting Hagia Sophia into a mosque. On top of this, his references to al-Aqsa Mosque construct an emotional opportunity by rendering an appeal for his decision by creating links between struggles in Palestine and Hagia Sophia.

Another example of Erdoğan's Islamic populist rhetoric came before the grand opening and Erdoğan's leading role in the mass praying with the people in Hagia Sophia Mosque on the 24th of July; Erdoğan stated the following:

This is the release of Hagia Sophia from the chains of captivity.² This chain is now torn apart. This was the greatest dream in our youth [...] this decision (transformation to the museum) that was taken during the single-party period is a betrayal to history as well as it is unlawful. (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, 2020b)

² In the original English translation from the official website of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, the word "chain of captivity" is omitted but it is present in the Turkish version, therefore the author translated the speech themselves.

These words of Erdoğan show that he (and the people that he represents) bears a certain resentment towards the decision to transform Hagia Sophia into a museum. Here the historical resentment could be seen, Erdoğan operationalizes the religious grievance that his voter base felt and continues to feel from the actions of the single-party period; he frames Hagia Sophia being transformed into a museum after its initial mosque status, which was given in 1453 as oppression, a “chain of captivity” to Muslims in Turkey and all over the world.

According to a poll that was conducted one month before the opening of Hagia Sophia as a mosque finds that 47% of the participants approved “the transformation of Hagia Sophia into a praying place for Muslims” (Türkiye Raporu, 2020b). This poll shows that there was a significant potential appeal before the transformation, and Erdoğan’s decision overlaps with the religious grievances of specific segments of the society; however, this decision creates further antagonism. Reducing the feeling of grievance and emergence of “satisfaction” does not happen through social inclusivity in the case of Hagia Sophia but happens through imposing grievances to the out-group, secular segment of the society, and this EOS constituted by secularizing reforms during the single-party era of Turkey in the 1920s led to rendering feelings of grievance and resentment in the AKP’s voter base more easily. To be clear, it should be underlined that the Islamic populist strategy of the AKP in the case of Hagia Sophia differs from western examples of populism by including a deep-seated religious grievance against the Kemalist elite, which became crystalized in the Hagia Sophia. Indeed, the AKP operationalized this religious grievance during the double crises of the economy and coronavirus, but the discursive strategy of Erdoğan lacks any certain references to the economic grievance or economic elites, rather he deliberately uses religious, Islamic terminology in combination with the historical context of the early republican period of Turkey to construct a Manichean dualism.

Conclusion

The transformation of Hagia Sophia from a museum to a mosque has been a controversial issue in Turkish politics and the social sphere. The transformation is branded by both Erdoğan and the AKP voter base as rejoining with the “ummah.” Due to Turkey’s particular history regarding rapid modernization processes when the Republic was being formed, the devoutly religious segment of Turkey felt religious grievances. This paper tried to show that the AKP in its history operationalized these religious grievances through Islamic populism, a key example of this operationalization is the recent transformation of the Hagia Sophia museum into a mosque, faced with two crises (the ongoing economic and the recent coronavirus pandemic), the AKP found itself losing votes, in order to garner support and to consolidate its votes, the AKP once again tapped into the historic religious grievances of its core voter base. As the polls show, there was already a sentiment that wanted Hagia Sophia to be a mosque in the devoutly religious segment. This sentiment of religious grievances by means of the transformation of Hagia Sophia was tried to be satisfied, as mentioned before, populist discourses alluding to the fact that Erdoğan took back and rejoined a key historical mosque with its “ummah” was operationalized and subsequently, after the opening ceremony this satisfaction of the devoutly religious segment could be seen since AKP’s voter rate rose by 3% after the following months of July. However, it is worth mentioning that the rise in numbers could also be partly explained by the coronavirus measures being relaxed in the summer months. Nevertheless, when countering the fact, the poll showing that 47% of the population supported Hagia Sophia being opened as a praying place for Muslims shows that the sentiment and the subsequent support that came after the opening points to the salience of the religious grievances. Against this backdrop, it is safe to say the AKP operationalizes the religious grievances of Sunni Muslims through Islamic populist rhetoric and strategies for electoral consolidation and this phenomenon could be seen concretely in the Hagia Sophia case. However, the gap in the populism literature regarding the relationship between

populism and religion, particularly in the context of Islam should be highlighted by prospective research. Further studies can explore the dynamics of religious grievances and Islamic populism in Turkey through analyses of further historical and current instances.

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