Everywhere Taksim

Toktamis, Kumru, David, Isabel

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Toktamis, Kumru and Isabel David.
Everywhere Taksim: Sowing the Seeds for a New Turkey at Gezi.
Amsterdam University Press, 2015.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/66388.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66388

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2347393
Section II
The Political Economy of Protests
The Gezi protests were the most significant challenge yet to the rule of the AKP, which came to power in 2002. Since then, the party has progressively increased its vote share and won a landslide victory with 50 per cent of the vote in the latest parliamentary elections on 12 June 2011. Opinion polls and research reveal that the AKP’s constituency consists of different class backgrounds and political orientations. A 2006 study revealed that AKP supporters have a lower socio-economic status, identify themselves as right-wing and religious, and reside in Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir and in rural regions (Özkırımlı and Kırmanoğlu 2006). Another poll showed that the majority of the AKP’s votes came from housewives, followed by farmers, blue-collar workers who work in the private sector and the unemployed. The AKP also received more than 50 per cent of the vote in suburbs and slums, whereas its weakest showing was in housing estates (23.8 per cent) (Odak Araştırma 2006, cited in Yıldırım 2009). What is novel about the party’s success is that it managed to gain the support of both the organised and marginalised sections of the working class and the second generation (or Anatolian) bourgeoisie. The AKP also attracted the support of groups with different political orientations. A poll conducted by Anar and Pollmark, commissioned by the AKP, reveals the profile of the AKP electorate in the 2011 elections: 27 per cent define themselves as conservative; 24.4 per cent as Turkish Nationalist; 16.4 per cent as pro- Atatürk Kemalist (Atatürkçü Kemalist); 7.2 per cent as social democrat; 5.9 per cent as liberal democrat; 3 per cent as nationalist (ulusalcı); and 1.4 per cent as Kurdish nationalist (Bostan 2011).

With this electoral backdrop in mind, this paper focuses on two issues: the reasons for the hegemony of the AKP and the impact of the Gezi protests on this hegemony. In order to explain the broad support enjoyed by the party, this article will employ a framework referred to as ‘neoliberal populism,’ which is widely used in contemporary literature on political economy, especially in the Latin American context. Neoliberal populism should be understood in Gramscian terms: a hegemonic project whereby political
leadership appeals to the masses as the ‘people’ and plays a significant role in constituting the hegemony of the power bloc over the subordinate classes, in particular the informal and disorganised sections of the working class (Yıldırım 2009, 82). Our analysis will reveal that the power bloc in Turkey includes the Istanbul bourgeoisie and the Anatolian bourgeoisie.

The neoliberal policies of the AKP became manifest in a gradual marketisation of public services, privatisations and the flexibilisation of labour. The AKP aimed to weaken welfare policies as a public obligation, which resulted in the state subcontracting its welfare provision duties to the private sector (Eder 2010, 181). Furthermore, charity groups and philanthropic associations have taken over some state functions. The neoliberal ideology of the party also became manifest in the so-called ‘urban transformation’ projects. As Cihan Tuğal writes, poor populations are displaced and public places, green areas and historical sites are demolished in order to rebuild the city in the image of capital. Tuğal adds that ‘[a]ll these unwanted spaces (and people) are being replaced by malls, skyscrapers, office spaces, and glossy remakes of historical buildings.’ The populist aspect of neoliberal populism, on the other hand, manifested itself in the explosion of social assistance programmes. A key feature is the increasing substitution of welfare state functions for social assistance programmes. This essentially means that services that should be carried out by the state to fulfil the ‘rights’ of citizens have been transformed into ‘social assistance,’ provided to unemployed masses through these projects (Bozkurt 2013, 390).

Understanding the AKP’s hegemony necessitates going beyond its economic policies. We must also assess the symbolic/ideological sources of the party’s hegemony. In order to do so, this paper will discuss how the AKP makes use of symbolic/religious codes such as Sunni Islam and conservatism, which are widely accepted in the Turkish society.

Analysis of the dynamics behind the AKP’s hegemony also demands a reassessment of the Gezi protests and their aftermath. According to Gramsci, a successful hegemonic power has to ensure that great masses of people spontaneously and actively give their consent to the power bloc. Yet, the cultural, economic and political aspects of hegemony are, in the last instance, always underpinned by the threat of violence. Gramsci argues that

---

1 ‘Power bloc’ is a concept used by Nicos Poulantzas to define the key feature of capitalist states. As opposed to precapitalist states, which were based on the exclusive domination of one class or fraction, a capitalist state is based on a plurality of dominant class fractions, one of which is hegemonic over the other (Poulantzas 1968).

while a hegemonic bloc leads coalition groups, it dominates antagonistic groups, which it tends to ‘liquidate, or to subjugate perhaps even by armed force’ (Jones 2006, 49). However, if a ruling group has to resort to coercion and repression, this means, according to Gramsci, that it has not achieved an ‘expansive’ hegemony, in which great masses of people spontaneously and actively give their consent to the bloc. According to this expansive hegemony, a hegemonic group adopts the interests of its subaltern in full and those subalterns come to ‘live’ the worldview of the hegemonic class as their own. In this situation, ‘a multiplicity of dispersed wills with heterogeneous aims are wielded together with a single aim, on the basis of an equal and common conception of the world’ (Gramsci 1971). Failure to construct an expansive hegemony might happen because a massive group in society has passed suddenly from a state of political passivity to a certain activity. This is precisely the crisis of hegemony, or the general crisis of the State (Gramsci 1971). How can we define the AKP’s hegemony after the Gezi protests? Is it an expansive or limited hegemony? Is the AKP experiencing a crisis in its hegemony? The last section of the paper will seek answers to these questions.

Understanding the AKP’s Hegemony

Neoliberal Populism and the AKP Rule

Neoliberal populism needs to be distinguished from classical populism. Classical populism is most often associated with leaders such as Juan Perón in Argentina, Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico and Getúlio Dornelles Vargas in Brazil (Cammack 2000, 151), whereas neoliberal populism is associated with leaders such as Alan Garcia in Peru and Fernando Collor in Brazil (Weyland 1996, 5). This list also includes Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil (Petras 2005) and Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand (Yıldırım 2009, 78).

Regardless of whether it is classical or neoliberal, populism can be conceptualised in two different ways. In the first conceptualisation, populism is defined purely in political terms. Politics is identified as the core domain of populism and socioeconomic characteristics are seen as logically contingent (Weyland 2001, 4). The second conceptualisation emphasises the economic and social content of populist policies and the meaning of populism for relations among different classes in society (Yıldırım 2009).

According to Weyland (1996, 5), ‘the term populism should not imply an automatic association with certain economic policies or socioeconomic
structures. A purely political notion of populism appears most appropriate and useful.' Weyland understands populism as a political strategy whereby a personal leader appeals to a heterogeneous mass of followers, many of whom have been excluded from the mainstream of development, yet are now available for mobilisation. What is specific about populism is that the leader reaches the followers in a seemingly direct, quasi-personal manner that largely bypasses established intermediary organisations, such as parties and interest associations.

Even if the leader builds new organisations or revives earlier populist organisations, they remain personal vehicles with low levels of institutionalisation (Weyland 1996, 5). In a similar vein, Robert Barr (2003, 1161) explains neopopulism as a ‘political phenomenon in which a leader attempts to build personalistic ties to the impoverished masses while pursuing neoliberal economic policies.’ Since this conceptualisation identifies politics as the core and socioeconomic characteristics as contingent features of populism, authors in this tradition see neoliberal populism as nothing but another wave of charismatic leaders using political strategies reminiscent of classical populism to reach and maintain power, but, this time, in the interest of neoliberal policies.

As Yıldırım highlights, what is problematic in this first conceptualisation is that populism is reduced to a technique of politics. This definition does not consider the class dimension; since building personalistic ties to the masses is the defining criterion, leaders like Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales are lumped together with Alberto Fujimori and Carlos Menem, in a process that completely overlooks the class basis of these leaders’ policies. Yıldırım (2009, 77, 79) is also critical of Barr’s explanation of neopopulism as a political phenomenon; he asserts that neoliberal populism cannot be reduced to a political phenomenon and that it should, instead, be understood in terms of a hegemonic project. Gramsci (2000, 206) defines a hegemonic project as a concrete programme developed in a particular historical moment through which a particular class/group maintains its hegemony through articulating its interests with the interests of subordinate classes/groups. Hence, the second conceptualisation of populism aims to unveil the connection between populism and class relations (Yıldırım 2009, 77).

Yıldırım defines AKP rule in Turkey as a period characterised by neoliberal populism. The defining feature of neoliberal populism is that the leadership aims to constitute the hegemony of the power bloc dominated by the big bourgeoisie over the subordinate classes by relating to the masses as the ‘people’ in an environment shaped by the increasing exploitation of labour, insecure working conditions and an attack on organised labour
Not surprisingly, the AKP’s neoliberal economic policies have created difficult conditions for labour. For example, Labour Law No. 4857, adopted in 2003, aimed to introduce flexibility in industrial relations, on the basis of which atypical forms of employment, such as ‘temporary employment relations,’ ‘partial work’ and ‘subcontracting’ have been legalised (Onaran 2002, 184). This law clearly translates AKP’s class politics. Hence, in order to alleviate the difficult conditions for labour, the AKP government resorted to neoliberal populism in this period by using populist distribution techniques.

The Explosion of Social Assistance Programmes

This section will assess the AKP’s populist measures, such as social assistance funds and transfers, which are the key strategy that enables the party to respond to the short-term demands of the masses, thereby expanding its support base. In the context of the neoliberal restructuring of the Turkish economy in the last three decades, the Fund for the Encouragement of Social Cooperation and Solidarity (Sosyal Yardımlaşma ve Dayanışmayı Teşvik Fonu, SYDTF), became a key vehicle for policies aiming to alleviate poverty via extension of social assistance mechanisms. Although the Fund was established in 1986 to provide means-tested social assistance to the poor, it was turned into a directorate by the AKP, the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Solidarity (Sosyal Yardımlaşma ve Dayanışma Genel Müdürlüğü, SYDGM) in 2004 (Buğra and Candas 2011, 521).

Eder points out that the most remarkable aspect of this institutional transformation was the degree of autonomy that the directorate gained as it began drawing a significant part of its resources from extra-budgetary funds. With the exception of transfers to the Ministry of National Education and Ministry of Health, SYDGM and its Fund Board were beyond public scrutiny and were only accountable to the office of the prime minister (Eder 2010, 174). It is possible to observe an increase between 2001 and 2004 in means-tested social expenditures by certain institutions directly involved in poverty alleviation, such as the General Directorate of Social Services and Child Protection (Sosyal Hizmetler ve Çocuk Esirgeme Kurumu, SHÇEK) and the General Directorate of Foundations (Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü) (Buğra and Adar 2008, 100). Yıldırım (2009, 98) points out that in 2003-2007, 54 per cent of the Fund’s resources were spent on social assistance (in-kind assistance such as food, coal, etc.), whereas 23 per cent was spent on conditional cash transfers in the form of monthly payments to poor families to send their children to school. It should be emphasised...
that means-tested social assistance measures are commonly regarded as incompatible with social citizenship rights, which should be realised through benefits in line with ‘universalist’ approaches (Buğra and Adar 2008, 91).

Meanwhile, municipalities have assumed greater responsibility in distributing social assistance since 2003 (Eder 2010, 178). In this period, municipalities exhibited a people-friendly attitude – organising soup kitchens for the poor, building giant food tents for iftar (fast-breaking) meals during the month of Ramadan and, most importantly, in-kind assistance to the poor. Yet, most of the funding for these services comes from those who contribute to the ‘charity funds’ of municipalities and not directly from the municipalities (Ibid.). The problem is that funding reliant on charity leads to inconsistency and unreliability in assistance programmes. Furthermore, following the subcontracting of certain services undertaken by local administrations to the private sector, municipality tenders have become a significant component of capital accumulation for the second-generation bourgeoisie (Yıldırım 2009, 100; Ercan and Oguz 2006). Eder (2010, 178) points out how charity can become a substitute for bribery: a typical arrangement would involve generous donations to the municipality charity fund in return for a lucrative infrastructure and a real-estate bid.

Another development that marks this era is the meteoric rise in the number of charity associations, philanthropic groups and NGOs, which aim to fill the social vacuum left by the absence of a functioning welfare state. The most important problem with community-based philanthropic groups is that there is usually some sort of conditionality attached to access to these services. More often than not, community affiliation and loyalty are expected in return. There is also growing evidence that such communities can create new patterns and layers of social exclusion.

As Eder (2010, 181) remarks, ‘[s]uch litmus tests in return for basic social assistance or social services are simply incompatible with the notion of all-inclusive, universal coverage.’ The significance of these findings is that, increasingly, labour in the public sector, which demands social rights through organised political action, gives way to the unemployed masses, categorised under the heading ‘unemployed and poor,’ who benefit primarily from assistance in kind and cash transfers. Through such populist measures, the AKP ensures continuous support from the poorest layers of society, enabling neoliberal accumulation and the hegemonic project of the big bourgeoisie to continue uninterrupted (Yıldırım 2009, 99).
The Symbolic/Ideological Sources of the Party’s Hegemony

Another variable that forms a crucial source of AKP hegemony is the symbolic/cultural sphere. This point is particularly important for a Gramscian analysis of hegemony. In order to establish moral, political and intellectual leadership in social life, it is necessary for the ruling coalition to take on at least some of the values of those it attempts to lead, thereby shaping its own ideals and imperatives (Jones 2006, 34). A key element of any hegemonic strategy is the formation of links with existing elements of culture. Gramsci refers to the concept of ‘common sense,’ which he believes is a complex formation partly drawn from ‘official’ conceptions of the world circulated by the ruling bloc and partly formed out of people’s practical experiences of social life. ‘Common sense’ offers a deeply held guide to life, directing people to act in certain ways and ruling out other modes of behaviour as unthinkable (Jones 2006, 9). Thus, the question raised by Eagleton (1991, 114) is crucial:

How is the working class to take power in a social formation where the dominant power is subtly, pervasively diffused throughout habitual daily practices, intimately interwoven with ‘culture’ itself, inscribed in the very texture of our experience from nursery school to funeral parlour? How do we combat a power which has become the ‘common sense’ of a whole social order, rather than one which is widely perceived as alien and oppressive?

In this respect, what needs to be underlined is that the AKP’s hegemony is not only constituted through populist policies but also through ideological symbols and religious/cultural codes. As Ercan, Oguz and Guzelsarı (2008, 2) underline, the second-generation bourgeoisie (the Anatolian bourgeoisie) tends to ‘use the symbolic/cultural sphere in every stage of their struggle for political power.’ The AKP government successfully appealed to their world of meaning. As the organic intellectuals of this class, the AKP cadres built the hegemony of the party on a peculiar amalgam of conservatism, Islamism and nationalism (Saracoğlu 2011, 39). Their aim was to create a perception of congruence between the lifestyle of the society and those occupying political power (Ibid., 44). Tuğal (2011, 91-92) underlines how Erdoğan broke his fasts in slums or shanties together with the poor when he was the Mayor of Istanbul. Interestingly, although Erdoğan had openly shunned Islamism and adopted neoliberalism, his past activities as an Islamist, his shared everyday practices with the poor and his origins in an
urban poor neighbourhood enabled popular sectors to read non-neoliberal meanings into the party. This symbolic capital would come to play a key role in constituting the AKP’s hegemony. The class difference between the AKP cadres in power and its poor constituency can only be overcome by this emphasis on common religious values (Bozkurt 2013, 384).

The AKP’s Hegemony after the Gezi Protests

This section will elaborate on the impact of the Gezi protests on the hegemony of the AKP. The demolition of Gezi Park in Taksim Square was part and parcel of a bigger project of rapid transformation of Istanbul and much of Turkey. For a long time, a key policy of the AKP has been to turn public lands over to private developers (Hallinan 2013). Even though the immediate cause of the Gezi protests was a response to the governing neoliberal party’s project of urban transformation, soon afterwards, urban questions quickly took a backseat as the protests grew massively as a result of police brutality.

As the protests spread beyond Istanbul, mobilising millions of people, other grievances against the government also became visible. Two criticisms were predominant. On the one hand, demonstrators protested the AKP’s neoliberal policies, including privatisations, the flexibilisation of labour and urban ‘transformation’ and ‘development’ for the sake of profiting a small number of private developers. On the other hand, protestors rebelled against a lack of democracy and the government’s conservative interventions. In the months leading up to the protests, the AKP-dominated parliament passed laws restricting the use of alcohol and tobacco, public kissing and abortion, and the prime minister called on mothers to have three children (Hallinan 2013). The AKP’s authoritarianism also became explicit in the way media felt compelled to implement self-censorship in order not to attract Erdoğan’s wrath, a tendency that became explicit during the Gezi protests, as Turkey’s major news networks remained mute on the discontent, airing penguin documentaries and cooking shows instead.

What was the impact of the Gezi protests on the hegemony of the party? The key argument of this paper is that there has been a transformation in the AKP’s hegemony and currently, for the various reasons that will be explained below, it is more appropriate to define the party’s hegemony as a limited hegemony, rather than an expanded hegemony. The Gezi protests involved the mobilisation of millions of people and marked the beginning of the crisis of expanded hegemony. Furthermore, the AKP lost the support of the West, which had been a significant factor in the party’s hegemony.
Turkey's pro-Islamist, yet ‘secular, democratic, Western-friendly’ government, which turned the nation into ‘a regional powerhouse,’ was projected as a model for the immature Arab Spring democracies. This strong backing by the US and the EU also sent an important message to the party’s constituency in Turkey. This support assured the secular electorate that the AKP was not against the Westernisation ideal of the Republic's founders. However, the government’s handling of the Gezi protests was heavily criticised by the representatives of the EU and the US. In June 2013, the European Parliament (EP) approved the ‘Gezi Park’ motion, which criticised the government’s actions. The US repeatedly cautioned Turkish authorities against seeking to punish any demonstrators merely for exercising their right to free speech during the protests. According to Henry Barkey, the attitude and the rhetoric employed by the government during the Gezi protests led to a serious uneasiness in Washington (Tanır 2013). BBC Turkish also reported, based on the account of an unnamed American specialist, that Turkey’s relations with the US had become strained since Erdoğan’s visit to the White House in May 2013 due to the AKP government’s policy on Syria and Egypt (Tanır 2013).

The corruption allegations against the prime minister that surfaced in 17 December 2013 further undermined the party’s hegemony. On that date, an anti-corruption operation was carried out, in which top businessmen, bankers, bureaucrats and politicians considered loyal to the government were arrested on corruption and bribery charges. Tape recordings that include the prime minister’s private conversations with his family members as well as with other ministers have been released, one after another. One of them includes a recording of the prime minister warning his son to hide large sums of money before the police raids of the 17 December anti-corruption operation. Yet, Erdoğan denied the authenticity of these recordings, claiming that they are fabrications (Nakhoul and Tattersall 2014).

The AKP’s hegemony largely rests on the party’s ability to keep the economy running smoothly. However, Erdoğan faces a significant challenge in this respect. Even though the AKP managed to achieve economic growth, this growth relied on short-term capital inflows. The AKP’s economic policies neither reduced unemployment, nor led to an increase in real wages. According to research conducted by the Organisation for Economic

---

5 ‘US Senate discusses Gezi Park protests.’ _Hürriyet Daily News_, 1 August 2013.
Co-operation and Development (OECD), Turkey is in the category of member countries with the highest income inequality. Currently, the growth rate has dropped and income levels are stagnant. CNBC reported that ‘Turkey has slipped alarmingly quickly from emerging market darling to market danger zone’ (Boyle 2014). Especially since the corruption charges that surfaced in December 2013, investor exodus is on the rise (Canlı Gaste 2014). Furthermore, the Turkish Lira has been devalued as local investors have been selling off their lira in favour of foreign currencies, and international investors have been staying away from the lira, pushing its value down to a record low of 2.3616 against the US dollar in January 2014 (Boyle 2014). The cost of Turkey’s debt rose alarmingly quickly, with ten-year debt hitting 10.45 per cent, its highest level since 2010 (Ibid.).

Hence, it is clear that the AKP is experiencing a hegemonic crisis that manifests itself in different ways. However, as the 2014 local elections revealed, this hegemonic crisis did not give way to an immediate electoral defeat for the party. The AKP won about 45 per cent of the votes cast, while the rest was divided across three other major parties in parliament. A significant reason for this is the fact that the Turkish political opposition is hopelessly divided and largely incompetent. Despite its vibrancy, the Gezi protest movement showed little capacity to mobilise an effective political campaign that can challenge the AKP’s political rule.

Conclusion

This paper had two main aims: to investigate the reasons behind the hegemony of the AKP and the impact of the Gezi protests on that hegemony. In order to achieve this aim, it made use of a theoretical framework referred to as ‘neoliberal populism.’ Throughout its rule, the AKP formulated economic policies that aimed to reward the first- and second-generation bourgeoisie, while, at the same time, adopting populist measures in order to ensure popular support.

However, it is impossible to understand the AKP’s hegemony just by looking at populist policies. A Gramscian analysis would be incomplete without assessing the symbolic/ideological sources of the party’s hegemony. AKP cadres established the party’s hegemony by identifying themselves with what Gramsci refers to as ‘common sense’ in Turkey, by embracing conservatism, Islamism and nationalism, thereby linking with existing elements of culture.

The 2011 elections, in which the AKP gained the support of different groups in society, including Turkish Nationalists, pro- Atatürk Kemalists,
social democrats and liberal democrats, revealed that the party had managed to establish an expansive hegemony. Economic growth, symbolised by major infrastructure projects, massive construction, modern roads and huge shopping centres, also seems to have contributed to this hegemony.

This paper has argued that the Gezi protests led to a transformation in the AKP’s hegemony and that the party’s hegemony can no longer be defined as expansive. It is more appropriate to define it as a limited hegemony, in which a hegemonic power has to resort to coercive and authoritarian means for enforcing its rule.

However, despite the recent corruption allegations, leaks and the increasing authoritarianism of the prime minister, the AKP’s voters did not penalise the party in the 2014 local elections. In dealing with its opponents, the AKP opted for a twofold response: on the one hand, it rallied its base, which it won over through neoliberal populism and through embracing conservatism, Islamism and nationalism; on the other, it cracked down on the opposition. Anti-democratic as it is, this method sufficed for the party to hold on to power, but whether it will continue to do so in the future remains to be seen.

Bibliography

Bostan, Yahya. 2011. ‘İşte%50’nin sırrı.’ Sabah, 3 October.