



DISCUSSION PAPER

Helalleşme and the CHP's New Political Strategy

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Introduction

"We will make this party a truly modern and civilised party." (CHP [YouTube Channel], 13 June 2023), stated Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the presidential candidate who was defeated in the second round of elections on 28 May. After the defeat, Kılıçdaroğlu has been silent except for one appearance on a TV station close to the CHP, which has led to significant criticism. Since then, the CHP chairman has been under attack from CHP circles.

Many journalists, writers and politicians, including Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, a popular face of the party, think that the CHP leadership needs to change. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu is seen as responsible not only for the 2023 elections but also for other defeats during his 13-year presidency.

In all 13 elections and referendums since 2002, the ruling AK Party has come out on top. In the 2023 elections, the Turkish people gave this party the mandate to govern the country for another five years (after two decades in power). Conversely, the

CHP received between 20 and 25 per cent of the vote in all elections. In the presidential elections since 2014, President Erdoğan has maintained a 52% share of the vote in every election.

While heated discussions about "change" spiralled within CHP circles, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who has been the party's leader since 2010, insists alongside his leadership team on maintaining the current agenda.

Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's call for a "modern and civilised" party represents an ironic symbolism. Since the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the CHP has presented itself as the address of modernity and civilisation, criticising its rivals, especially the AK Party government in the last two decades, as reactionary. Today, Kılıçdaroğlu's vision of modernisation for the CHP is a first-hand admission that the party has missed something. In fact, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu has made significant changes in the CHP during his presidential career.

Call for Change!

On 29 May, the day after the second round of elections, Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu gave a speech at the 570th-anniversary celebrations of the Conquest of Istanbul. While the opposition parties had not yet recovered from the shock of the defeat, this was the first morale-boosting and leadership-oriented speech conveyed to the opposition electorate. The speech emphasised two things. First, İmamoğlu put himself front and centre of the party's leadership. He said that he was the "most hardworking soldier" of the election campaign process, that he will "speed up things from now on", adding, "I don't have helplessness in my lexicon" (KRTKulturTV [Youtube Channel], 29 May 2023).

Initially, Ekrem İmamoğlu was highly considered as a presidential candidate in the 2023 general elections. In March 2023, the leader of the İYİ Party, Meral Akşener, the largest partner of the Nation Alliance after the CHP, caused a great stir, announcing she was leaving the alliance because neither Istanbul's mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu nor Ankara's Mayor Mansur Yavaş was nominated. Meanwhile, the other members of the alliance and the CHP insisted on Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's candidacy. This crisis was soon resolved when

İmamoğlu and Yavaş were included in the campaign as vice president candidates, and Akşener returned to the fold.

Many observers consider İmamoğlu as a possible future leader for the opposition. His 29 May speech can be seen from this perspective, especially that his call for change targeted the CHP leadership and chairman Kılıçdaroğlu. Subsequently, İmamoğlu started to express his intentions more openly. Meetings were held with Kılıçdaroğlu in private (Sayın, 2023). During these meetings, İmamoğlu is said to have made various suggestions to Kılıçdaroğlu for a change in the presidency. Kılıçdaroğlu, on the other hand, said that it was his "duty to steer the ship to a safe harbour". Such discussions continue ahead of the March 2024 local elections.

On the other hand, what does change entail in this situation remains unclear. For many, Kılıçdaroğlu symbolises the old CHP, as his age seems to suggest, while the dynamic and relatively young İmamoğlu appears to exemplify youth and novelty. However, the issues at stake are more complicated.

From the Democrat Party to the Present: Elites vs. People

The CHP was the founding party of the Republic and the instigator of secular modernity. However, a very thorny path awaited Turkish democracy. The first attempt at transition to multi-party life was suspended in 1930 after another newly incepted party received popular support (Zurcher, 2004). The first fair multi-party democratic election was held in 1950. Almost every decade following 1950, the established order felt the need to steer the government through a coup or coup attempt. In 1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997, Turkish democracy was subjected to various military actions that resulted in military takeovers. In 2007 and 2015, an attempted coup d'état and a warning by factions within the military failed to achieve their goals. The army continued to exist as a politicised structure for many years. Zurcher (2014) labels Turkish democracy

"an uneasy democracy" when examining this factor.

On the other hand, one of the major goals of the official ideology was the construction of modern Turkish citizenship. The establishment of secularism and radical changes in the place of religion in political and social life was one of the foremost goals of the political elites and bureaucracy since the founding years of the Republic. The pains in the popular adoption of modernist and secular reforms and how they were practised have formed an important collective memory for shaping identity politics in Türkiye.

In the 1990s, the rise of the national vision (milli görüş) led by Necmettin Erbakan caused a big stir in Turkish politics. Erbakan and his Islamist political movement,

were seen as a threat by the establishment. Under these circumstances, the regime's understanding of secularism manifested in various prohibitions. The strict ban on headscarves in universities exemplifies the heavy-handed approach of the yesteryears. According to Göle (2000), religious symbols, which had been excluded from the public sphere in the first decades of the Republic, became visible again from the 1980s onwards, and this situation caused a conflict. She also says that the demands of Muslim female students to wear headscarves to classes were perceived by secular elites as a violation of the public space that "belonged to them".

The 1997 national security decrees worked as a coup d'état and ended the coalition government led by Erbakan. The judicial and security bureaucracy and secular elites saw the government as a threat to the secular order. This operation, later known as the 28 February process, would be the subject of judicial proceedings, and some military leaders during this period were found guilty. In those days, the CHP was the voice of the official ideology. In this regard, the 28 February "coup" was one of the references CHP leader

Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu used apologetically during the 2023 election campaign.

The elites' concerns about secularism did not start in 1997. Throughout the history of the Republic, secularism has been one of the thorniest issues for Türkiye. For example, secularism played an important role in the first attempt at multi-party life, when the Free Republican Party (Serbest Cumhuriyet Fırkası) was quickly shut down after its establishment. Then, before the 1960 coup d'état, the government of Adnan Menderes was deemed a threat to secularism (Zurcher, 2014). The CHP was the political voice that channelled the security apparatus' criticism of Menderes. It should be noted that Menderes' Democrat Party also criticised the CHP, the founding party of the Republic, singling out its strict secularist practices and highlighting related issues in its political communication.

For a long time, the CHP represented the civilian facade for the military, bureaucracy, and business elites. Thus, this party failed to come to power via popular vote, except for Bülent Ecevit's success in the 1970s.

AK Party vs CHP

Founded in 2001 under the leadership of former Istanbul Mayor Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who had been imprisoned for a poem he had recited during the 28 February process, the AK Party became the ruling party with 34% of the vote in the general elections a year later, in 2002. The only other party to pass the 10% threshold was the CHP. For five years, Türkiye experienced parliamentary politics with the AK Party in power and the CHP as the main opposition. Although other parties later entered the parliament, the picture has never changed since 2002, with the AK Party in power and the CHP as the main opposition.

Although some of the AK Party's founding members had Islamist and nationalist backgrounds, the party adopted a conservative democratic ideology. The acceleration of the EU accession process, Türkiye's democratisation, and economic development and stability were the most frequently emphasised points of the AK Party. However, the CHP, senior bureaucrats, especially President Ahmet Necdet Sezer, and the

security and judicial bureaucracies found the AK Party's modern image unconvincing. Disrespect of secularism and conspiracy theories that the AK Party had a hidden agenda were among the most important criticisms of the opposition. The April 2007 memorandum issued by the Chief of General Staff and the 2008 AK Party closure case represented the peak points of pressure targeting the AK Party. However, the latter survived these coercion tactics by increasing its votes.

The Road to "Helalleşme"

Helalleşme means reciprocal apology and process of reconciliation that has a deep religious connotation. Once two people make *helalleşme*, this guarantees they will not seek their right in front of God on judgement day. Therefore, a full reconciliation occurs.

CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu used such an approach during the 2023 presidential election campaign. This concept included an apology, destined for religious people. Kılıçdaroğlu apologised many times for the headscarf bans. He made statements about the victims of 28 February. He stated that such oppression would not happen again in his government.

In this context, it can be said that the "helalleşme" is a move to overcome the CHP's ceiling in terms of vote tally and a strategy to prevail in the cultural war that the party has been losing for two decades. In the context, the CHP's emphasis on secularism lost steam and there was an urgent need to recalibrate the political discourse. However, the CHP's transformation process was not easy. It is still a matter of debate whether the transformation has been fully realised.

When Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu took over as CHP leader in 2010, the tone of secularism-based accusations against the AK Party softened day by day. The CHP's years of electoral defeats had shown that the rigid secularist discourse did not resonate positively with the public. Moreover, some figures from Islamist politics were placed in the party leadership. The first major experiment was the nomination of Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu in the 2014 presidential elections.

In the 2014 elections, the two largest opposition parties, MHP and CHP, decided to nominate a joint candidate.

Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu was an academic with no political background, a former secretary general of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and was known as a conservative scholar. While İhsanoğlu was not a seasoned political leader, it was hoped that the conservative candidate would send a positive message to the conservative electorate. In this election, İhsanoğlu received 38% of the vote. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was elected president for the first time with nearly 52% of the vote.

In the 2018 elections, a compromise was reached between the Saadet Party, a representative of the national vision tradition, and the CHP on the presidential candidacy of Abdullah Gül, the former president and one of the founders of the AK Party. This compromise led to friction within the CHP. However, dissenting voices could not thwart this idea. Ultimately, Abdullah Gül was not nominated because the second largest opposition party, the İYİ Party, did not support such a plan (HaberTurk, 2020). Nevertheless, the CHP's initiative was an important indicator of a change in its political strategy.

In 2007, the possibility of Gül being elected president as the AK Party candidate resulted in a major state crisis. Judicial decisions and a memorandum were used to block this process. At that time, the CHP was one of the main actors in the ensuing parliamentary crisis. Nevertheless, the crisis ended with a decisive election victory for the AK Party. Abdullah Gül was elected president. Interestingly, 11 years later, the CHP attempted to make Abdullah Gül its candidate. This dramatic change also shows the CHP's renewal efforts.

Bekaroğlu's Report

Although the examples of Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu and Abdullah Gül indicate a change of strategy, other steps followed such as inserting conservative elements within the party's top management. For example, the new deputy chairman Mehmet Bekaroğlu (2016), who comes from an Islamist background, wrote a report in 2016 that criticised the party's past and made several suggestions for the future.

Mehmet Bekaroğlu is a politician known for his religious backdrop and writings emphasising social justice. He was elected as an MP from the Fazilet Party led by Erbakan in 1999. In 2014, he joined the CHP and was appointed deputy chairman. Like Bekaroğlu, a few other renowned religious figures joined the CHP during this period (Independent Türkçe, 2021).

Bekaroğlu presented a report to the party assembly and MPs in 2016. The report, which was covered by the media, harshly criticised the CHP. Bekaroğlu emphasises that the CHP's failure to come to power for 66 years should be analysed, and radical changes should be made. The main point of his criticism, which starts from the foundation of the Republic, is that the conservative and religious people, the lower classes, and Kurdish people do not vote for the party due to grievances caused by the CHP's years in government.

Bekaroğlu's report also emphasised that the headscarf is not only a symbol of religiosity but is also the outfit

of poor rural females coming from the countryside to the city. In other words, the CHP's problem with the headscarf has become a symbol of its elitist attitude not only against the religious but also against the lower classes. Bekaroğlu concluded: "CHP should abandon its appearance as a party that carries upper class conservatism and fully defend equality, freedoms and social justice. For this, it must first and foremost reject its historical mission of modernising/Westernising/monotyping and become a liberating political party that respects the beliefs and values of society."

Table of Six

The CHP cooperated with the conservative nationalist MHP in the 2014 elections. In the 2018 elections, there was an attempt to run a joint candidate with the Saadet Party, a religious party, but this plan failed. However, in 2018, along with the CHP, İYİ Party and Democratic Party, the Saadet Party entered the elections under the umbrella of the Nation Alliance, and three deputies from the Saadet Party entered the parliament from CHP lists.

Although the CHP has been seeking alliances to broaden its voter base for a long time, it cannot be said that these attempts have gone beyond strategic collaborations. This strategy yielded its most positive result in the 2019 local elections. In Istanbul and Ankara the Nation Alliance entered the elections with a single candidate in many cities, the HDP strategically did not field candidates in most of them, and the mayoral candidates of the alliance won the elections in some of these provinces, including İstanbul and Ankara.

However, two developments took place in late 2019 and early 2020. At the end of 2019, former prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, a former prominent AK Party figure, announced the establishment of the Gelecek Party. Moreover, in March 2020, Ali Babacan's Deva Party, also

a minister in AK Party governments, was founded. In early 2022, a year and a half before the elections, the number of parties in the national alliance increased to six with the addition of Davutoğlu and Babacan's parties. More important than the increase in the number of parties was that these two names had been in the AK Party cadres for many years.

In the elections, the Gelecek, Deva, Saadet and Democrat Parties nominated candidates from CHP lists. Out of the 600 parliamentary candidates, 71 were allocated to these parties. As a result of the elections, 39 of these candidates entered the parliament. It was impossible for these parties to reach such a high number of parliamentarians if they entered the elections outside this arrangement. At the same time, the presidents of all the parties would become vice presidents if Kılıçdaroğlu was elected as president.

The purpose of this alliance was to help the CHP, which reached its limits especially in the secular electorate, to overcome its shortcomings in the presidential race. However, the political line that developed in parallel with the alliance and which Kılıçdaroğlu gradually raised during his 10-year term as CHP chairman was embodied in the discourse of *helalleşme*.

Enter *Helalleşme*

Shortly before the establishment of the Table of Six, Kılıçdaroğlu brought the discourse of *helalleşme* in 2021. Kılıçdaroğlu announced this new concept in a video with the following words;

"It is time to make amends. To strengthen our social relations and heal our wounds, we need to take responsibility for past mistakes and ask for forgiveness. The party I lead has also caused wounds in the past. For a long time, I have been trying to change the system that created these wounds in the first place, and now it is time to turn outward. I am embarking on a journey to ask for forgiveness to heal these wounds. I will start my meetings with the communities and individuals we have frightened and offended in the past, with representatives of different lifestyles." (HalkTV [YouTube Channel], 13 November 2021)

However, as mentioned above, this new discourse did not come out of nowhere. For some time, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu had started to make statements that paved the way for *helalleşme*. For example, in 2019, he said the following.

"We have many faults too. Let's speak the truth. We made the headscarf issue the most important issue of the Republic of Türkiye. A woman can wear a headscarf or not. No one can interfere" (TGRTHaberTV [YouTube Channel] 5 October 2019).

The *helalleşme* campaign covered the grievances that affected many different segments of society during CHP's rule. However, this campaign effectively sought the votes of religious groups. Kılıçdaroğlu emphasised this direction. In this respect, it should be noted that in a TV program, he participated in, he said that the segment of population he cared about the most was women wearing headscarves (Haber Global [YouTube Channel], 15 Dec 2021).

It is important to note that the *helalleşme* campaign went hand in hand with the inception of the six-party table alliance. On the one hand, the CHP accelerated its cooperation with religious and conservative parties, and on the other, Kılıçdaroğlu tried to overcome his disadvantage in identity politics by using an inclusive language.

Leading up to the 2023 elections, the most defining element of the CHP's campaign was the emphasis on the coexistence of different identities. The heart sign symbolising inclusiveness, which Kılıçdaroğlu made a symbol during the election process, was also indicative of this. On the other hand, on issues such as the economy, the CHP's discourse was dominated by populist discourses. A holistic project was not part of the campaign in this context.

How "*Helalleşme*" Worked

According to the results of the second round of the presidential elections, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was re-elected with 52% of the vote, slightly more than in 2014 and slightly less than in 2018. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu remained at 48%. From this point of view, we can say that Tayyip Erdoğan maintained his vote, while Kılıçdaroğlu succeeded in uniting the opposition but failed to increase his votes. In this respect, it can be said that the efforts to make amends and get the votes from other conservative segments did not yield a clear-cut result. However, when given a closer look, one can say that the *helalleşme* discourse has struck a chord.

For the first time in many years, the CHP won parliamentary seats in provinces such as Karabük, Düzce and Rize, known for their religious voters. When the results of other provinces with a high concentration of religious voters are analysed, it is seen that CHP increased its vote tally (Oğur, 2023). In provinces where secular voters are concentrated, CHP lost votes to its alliance partner İYİ Party. Similarly, in the presidential elections, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu managed to get more votes in many provinces with a higher concentration of religious voters than all previous opposition candidates combined.

Arguably, the Deva Gelecek and Saadet party voters, the Table of Six alliance and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's moderate secular and apologetic stance resonated with some voters. On the other hand, looking at the overall picture, the balance of votes between the opposition and the government seems to have remained unchanged. There are two different reasons for this situation. First, the politics of *helalleşme* has limitations. Secondly, the ruling party had an effective counterstrategy.

Limits of Helalleşme

The politics of *helalleşme* may have partially saved the CHP from some of its negative connotations. We see that this has partially resonated with the electorate. However, this does not change the fact that the CHP and the table of six did not develop a concrete and interesting project. For example, the poverty and income inequality campaign did not go beyond populist promises. The CHP's campaign in this context paled compared to what a 20-year-old government has done so far and what it can do with its experience and power. The fact that the campaign's backbone was an apology for the past and a proposal to overcome identity politics had limited impact.

Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu was able to bring different identities together. While identity politics characterises this era, this approach has a silver lining. For example, in Türkiye, where the headscarf bans are no longer in place, it is possible to say that even if the apology was able to remove some of the negative scars of the past, it did not express a vision of the future that would be sufficient to take over the government.

In addition, another important issue is that the AK Party has also expanded its alliance. The DSP, which emerged from the CHP, the MHP, from which the İYİ Party emerged; Hüda-par, known for its religious and Kurdish identity; and the Yeniden Refah Party, which emerged from the Saadet Party, were members of the

People's Alliance led by the AK Party. In other words, different identity groups were represented on both sides.

The 2023 elections may go down in history as one of Türkiye's most important turning points in this respect. Türkiye had previously experienced coalition governments of disparate political parties. However, it was the first time that alliances of such different parties attempted to govern the country. The transition to the presidential system, which requires 50%+1 votes, played a major role in this situation. As a result, both alliances had partners who stood out with their religious, nationalist, conservative, secular, and Kurdish identities.

In this respect, it is necessary to see the change in the context of Turkish politics. Ten years ago, the political fault lines were between religiosity and secularism. Although this distinction still exists today, as the alliances show, the public seems to have departed from these dividing lines. The fact that Kılıçdaroğlu's campaign was centred on an outdated context is arguably among the key reasons for his failure.

In other words, the AK Party's alliance with different political parties and the CHP's alliances and *helalleşme* discourse implied that an era had passed in Türkiye. Thus, the *helalleşme* concept, while necessary to move on, remained insufficient to give the final push and win the election.

What is Next for the CHP

Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu is strongly positioned in the party's org chart because of his 13-year chairmanship. The criticism of Kılıçdaroğlu that emerged after the election defeat did not affect him as all provincial chairs issued a joint statement in his support. No criticism of Kılıçdaroğlu emanated from senior party officials.

However, media outlets affiliated with the opposition and voters have been calling for change. Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, one of the party's popular figures and the winner of the CHP's only major electoral victory in many years (Istanbul mayoral race), is the favourite of this trend. Thus, İmamoğlu has been calling for change, implying he is against Kılıçdaroğlu staying as chairman. In the face of it, it is normal to demand a change of chairman after failing to increase

the party's votes during his 13 year-tenure. Meanwhile, Kılıçdaroğlu also uses the motto of change and talks about modernising the party.

Beyond the struggle for leadership, the CHP appears to be in a much bigger crisis. The change that Kılıçdaroğlu had long wanted to bring about in the CHP did not occur as per his plan. The goal of becoming the ruling party and the need to win conservative votes kept the friction within the party under check. Many initiatives, such as Bekaraoğlu's report, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu's candidacy, and the idea of nominating Abdullah Gül together with the Saadet Party, were landmarks in the party's U-turn policy, but these steps were met with stiff resistance on various levels. Finally, there was also criticism for the table of six. However, for the first time,

Kılıçdaroğlu put this project at the centre of his 2023 election campaign along with his candidacy. However, this strategy was not enough to bring the CHP to power. Now the scale of criticism and opposition from CHP supporters has grown.

However, an important shortcoming plagues the discourse of İmamoğlu and the opposition within the CHP, namely the ambiguity of what kind of change they promise. Topics such as the CHP's rapprochement with religious parties, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's old age and the failure to win elections for years are criticised. However, it is hard to say, for example, that what is being proposed is a return to the old CHP. The İmamoğlu partisans prefer to play in a field within the ambiguity of the criticisms of the opposition within the CHP. "We are faced with an opposition structure that has failed to become an alternative to power," he says in his manifesto for change, before adding: "A decisive

will for change that will start in the CHP, if it succeeds in questioning political attitudes and institutionalising internal party democracy, will bring about a renewal in the opposition in general and a will to enlarge the universe of opposition.". However, "the political attitudes" that will be questioned and what will replace them are deliberately left blank.

Kılıçdaroğlu has declared that the CHP has departed from its old self with *helalleşme*. The party cannot go back to its previous position. However, neither Kılıçdaroğlu nor the opposition voices are discussing a future vision they share. What is their newly adopted ideological position? What kind of project for Türkiye will the CHP propose after leaving its old self?

For now, the debate has been reduced to a leadership debate. The magic word "change" is nothing more than an empty signifier, at least in this debate.

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