

DISCUSSION PAPER

2024's Crucial Test: The Good Party's Fight for Relevance in Turkish Politics

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Introduction

The Good Party (İYİ Parti) was established as a reaction to the Nationalist Movement Party's (MHP) alliance with the AK Party, attracting MHP members who dissented from this direction, including prominent nationalist figures such as Meral Akşener, Ümit Özdağ, and Koray Aydın. These individuals opposed Devlet Bahçeli's leadership since he succeeded Alparslan Türkeş, the MHP's original leader, in 1997.

Notably, the party's inception wasn't limited to nationalist ideology. Meral Akşener, despite her nationalist beginnings, also has roots in the centre-right DYP and was involved in the early formation of the AK Party, although she ultimately did not join (Birgün, 2024). This reflects the Good Party's broader ideological pursuit, mirroring Akşener's diverse political journey.

The Good Party's foundation saw the convergence of individuals from various political backgrounds, including the AK Party, CHP, DSP, and Welfare Party, alongside technocrats like the former Central Bank

Governor Durmuş Yılmaz (Halk TV, 2017). This blend positioned the Good Party as a liberal, catch-all entity under nationalist leadership.

Türkiye's political landscape, known for the emergence and disappearance of numerous parties, posed a challenging arena for the Good Party. Nonetheless, it distinguished itself by securing 10% of the votes in its debut election, although it struggled to meet its ambitious goals subsequently. The 2024 local elections represent a critical juncture for the party, marking its first electoral foray independent of any alliance since its inception, especially after a tumultuous period post-May 2023 elections, involving internal strife and tension with former allies.

The Good Party's primary challenge has been an ongoing identity crisis, grappling with its nationalist foundation while striving to attract a broader, centre-right constituency. This balancing act continues amid speculation about the party's potential shift towards more right-wing ideologies.

Big Promises, Limited Successes

At the 2017 founding congress of the Good Party, Meral Akşener was hailed with cries of "Prime Minister Meral." With Türkiye's shift to a presidential system earlier that year, Akşener swiftly corrected the slogan to "President, not Prime Minister," setting her sights on securing over half the votes to lead Turkish politics.

Ahead of the 2023 elections, Akşener, echoing her previous ambition, stated she aimed for the Prime Minister's role, aligning with the opposition's pledge to revert Türkiye to a parliamentary system. This marked her intent to lead a systemic change.

Since its inception, the Good Party has faced three electoral challenges. The party's initial hurdle was meeting eligibility requirements for the 2018 general elections, which was overcome with the support of 15 deputies from the Republican People's Party (CHP), allowing it to contest the elections. The CHP and the Good Party have since formed alliances, though Akşener later expressed regret over the arrangement (TRT Haber, 2023).

The introduction of the alliance system in Turkish politics enabled smaller parties to collaborate with larger ones to surmount the electoral threshold. The Good Party joined forces with the CHP in successive elections, showcasing mutual support in various municipal elections.

However, internal alliance dynamics were not always smooth. In 2018, Akşener's resistance to nominating Abdullah Gül as a joint candidate (Cumhuriyet, 2023) reflected her ambition to champion the centre-right

and distinguish her leadership within the Good Party. Gül was a political figure well known to conservative voters who had served as prime minister in the first period of the Ak Party government and then as president. A personality with such a calibre could sway the votes of centre-right voters, but this option was considered a threat to Akşener's long-term aspirations.

In 2023, the opposition backed CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu for the presidency, but he fell short in the second round, allowing Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to extend his presidency. Meanwhile, the Good Party retained its 10% vote share.

Achieving and sustaining a 10% electoral share signifies a notable feat for the newly established Good Party. However, the situation of "neither winning nor losing" for a party that has set its goal on dominating Turkish political life from the get-go has caused perpetual unease within the Good Party. The gap between unrealistic ambitions and middling performances hints at a strategic and ideological impasse, potentially placing it at a disadvantage in the upcoming 2024 local elections.

Initially courting centre-right voters, the Good Party aspired to capitalise on any potential decline of the ruling AK Party. Akşener's ambition to ascend to the presidency and then the prime ministership underscored this strategy. Nevertheless, as these aspirations remain unfulfilled, the party grapples with an expanding ideological dilemma and organisational challenges.



Leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP), Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu (L) and Leader of the IYI Party Meral Akşener (R) hold a joint press conference after a meeting at IYI Party Headquarters, in Ankara, Turkey on November 25, 2020. (Ali Balıkcı - Anadolu Agency)

Ideological Tremors

Bridging History

The Good Party (İYİ Party) symbolised by the acronym "İYİ", which stands for "good" in Turkish, carries a deep historical resonance. Its emblem, representing the Kayı tribe—ancestors to the founders of the Ottoman Empire—sits at the heart of Türkiye's complex historical narrative. While the Republic of Türkiye was built upon the institutional legacies of the Ottomans, there was a deliberate shift in the official discourse to distance the new Republic from its Ottoman past, labelling it as the "old regime" and pushing a more secularist perspective. This created a symbolic battleground in Turkish politics: secularists viewed Ottoman references as regressive, whereas conservatives saw them as a connection to lost religious and national values.

The İYİ Party's use of the Kayı tribe's flag serves as a unique reconciliation of these opposing views, drawing support from both secularists and conservatives. At the time of the İYİ party's founding, this flag was popularised through the popular TRT series *Diriliş Ertuğrul* (Resurrection Ertugrul) as a reference to the strong historical roots of the Turkish state that should unite secularists and conservatives. This inclusive strategy is further reflected in the party's broader historical references, which aim to establish its ideological identity. For instance, the 2021 commercial "On the Path of Omar, in the Footsteps of Atatürk" ties together historical personalities that resonate with both Sunni religious and secular constituencies, indicating the party's effort to appeal across Türkiye's societal divide (Serbestiyet, 2021). The commercial refers to political figures from various mainstream ideological positions that have left their mark on Turkish political life, such as Süleyman Demirel, Necmettin Erbakan, Bülent Ecevit, Alparslan Türkeş and Turgut Özal.

Meral Akşener, the party's founding leader, frequently incorporates historical themes into her rhetoric, framing the Republic's history as a democratic struggle against authoritarianism—a view resonating with the centre-right narrative that has dominated Turkish parliamentary politics since 1950 (Medyascope [YouTube Channel], 2017). In the same speech, she addressed "80 million" Turks, which is the entire population of Türkiye, hoping to represent the aspirations of all citizens from all walks of life. However, the post-2023 election period has seen shifts in

both the historical references the party uses and the demographics it aims to reach.

Akşener, alongside nationalist personalities, founded the party. Her political journey, transcending various political spheres, from nationalist to centre-right affiliations, was an asset to the party. Challenges to the party's ideological stance have arisen, notably with the expulsion of Ümit Özdağ and the reassignment of other nationalist figures within the party, signalling a strategic move towards a more centre-right position. These actions have sparked discussions on the party's ideological identity and its place within Türkiye's political spectrum, with some comparing its orientation to the legacy of Süleyman Demirel's Justice Party (Yetkin, 2022).

As the İYİ Party navigates Türkiye's political currents, its engagement with historical symbolism and efforts to bridge diverse ideological factions highlight its unique position. These developments underscore the party's ongoing quest to define its identity amidst Türkiye's ever-evolving political landscape, striving for inclusivity while grappling with internal dynamics and external perceptions.

A changing designation of citizenship

The Good Party, born from the divergent paths within Turkish nationalism, represented by figures disillusioned with the Nationalist Movement Party's (MHP) alliance with the AK Party, has carved its place in Türkiye's political spectrum. Among its founding luminaries were Meral Akşener, alongside notable nationalists who contested MHP's leadership, signalling a nuanced departure toward a broader, inclusive vision. However, this foundation was not solely nationalist; Akşener's diverse political journey, touching the True Path Party (DYP) and the AK Party, mirrored the Good Party's identity quest, positioning it as a liberal entity with nationalist leadership.

Akşener's initial rhetoric, marked by inclusivity and pragmatism, aimed at unifying Türkiye's multifaceted society by transcending the secularist-conservative divide. It notably addressed the sensitive Kurdish issue with a tone distinct from traditional nationalist

narratives. Even though Akşener carefully crafted its language on this matter, trying to hold a common "central" position among different identities and going the extra mile to engage with this electorate, these efforts did not materialise.

The Good Party's early outreach efforts, especially in predominantly Kurdish regions, reflected a departure from security-centric views, signalling an embrace of a broader electorate base. From its early years until the 2023 elections, the Good Party tried to send positive messages to the Kurds. Meral Akşener's inclusive messages during her visit to Diyarbakır in January 2023 went beyond the security-centred perspective of the nationalist discourse (Aslan, 2023). Still, the Good Party failed to resonate with Kurdish voters.

This was not the case for other political parties. For instance, the DEM Party, whether with its current name or its earlier iterations, put the Kurdish issue at the top of its agenda and attracted a significant portion of the Kurdish vote. Similarly, the AK Party has received almost half of the votes of Kurdish voters in the last two decades. This is quite a feat given that nationalist and centre-right parties in the past failed to appeal to this constituency.

Balancing its alliance with the CHP and navigating its stance towards the Kurdish issue, particularly the informal cooperation with the HDP (now DEM Party), presented challenges for the Good Party. The tacit and informal cooperation with the HDP has been a challenging relationship for a party with nationalist roots. HDP, which is accused of having links with the terrorist group PKK, regularly draws the ire of Turkish nationalists.

Yet, in both the 2019 local elections and the 2023 general elections, HDP supported the nation's alliance, which also included the Good Party. This symbiosis was not to the liking of the Good Party's ultranationalist cadre, resulting in the resignation of several prominent party figures (AA, 2023).

The Good Party managed this process by refraining from mentioning the HDP officially and in the rhetoric of its leading figures. On the other hand, this tactic was a way of protecting its claim among Kurdish voters. Post-2023, amidst the dissolution of its alliance with the CHP, the Good Party sought repositioning, openly critiquing the CHP, especially regarding its HDP relations, indicating a strategic ideological recalibration.

The nationalist tone of the Good Party's discourse seems to have increased. Its historical narrative and targeted audience have also changed. Akşener's remarks at the opening of the 2024 local elections candidate presentation meeting show this:

"The grandchildren of Oğuz Father, Bilge Kagan, Atilla and Nayman Mother; Children of Kürşad, Alparslan, Fatih Sultan Mehmet; Gazi Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's gray wolves, Türkiye's good and brave sons, welcome to the introductory meeting of our local election declaration and mayor candidates. Greetings to those who are waiting for our way, in the Aegean, the heart of the Turk; in Thrace, the longing of the Turk; in the Black Sea, the beating heart of the Turk. Greetings to those in Ahlat, Ani and Eastern Anatolia who carry the historical guidance of our glorious ancestors to this day. Greetings to those who opened their hearts to us and embraced us in the Southeast." (İyi Parti [YouTube Channel], 2024)

Akşener's discourse has notably shifted from its pre-2023 positions, embedding a stronger nationalist tone, including references to pre-Islamic Turkish history and symbolically aligning with "Atatürk's grey wolves." "Grey Wolves" is both one of the symbols of ancient Turkish culture and a nationalist youth structure associated with MHP that has engaged in armed violence during the 1970s heated political atmosphere. A significant part of the founding figures of the Good Party comes from this movement.

Akşener also positioned the founder of the Republic ideologically as the leader of nationalism. This marked a significant ideological pivot, aiming to resonate with a wider spectrum of nationalist and secular voters while subtly delineating its audience, especially in Kurdish-dominant regions. It reflected a nuanced approach to Türkiye's complex identity politics.

The second striking point in Akşener's words is related to its definition of Turk. Save for the Southeastern region, where Kurds form the predominant ethnic group, she refers to other regions of Türkiye as the Turkish homeland. However, when addressing the Southeast, Akşener uses a more restrained language. This choice clearly differs from the language that the Good Party has chosen since its establishment. However, on the other hand, it is in harmony with the reference to pre-Islamic Turkish history and grey wolves.

Although Ottoman and Islamic references were ignored in the first years of the Republic, Islam was the determining factor in defining citizenship within the new nation-state. While non-Muslims were defined as minorities and gained rights within this framework, Muslim groups within the borders of the national state were defined as citizens. Constitutionally, the citizen's designation was Turk. Some of the Kurdish concerns are directly related to these definitions. The way political parties used the definition of Turk, the ties they established between Islam and citizenship, and their reading of history usually give important clues about their position on the Kurdish issue.

For example, in an interview, Meral Akşener defined the notion of Kurd and Turk using an Islamic referential:

"The majority is defined according to our religion. The minority is also defined according to religion. So that majority is Muslim, and the others are non-Muslims. All the duties, obligations, and rights of the minority... They are done with the approval of the majority. But that majority also has a say over the minority. This is the fundamental question now: Are we part of this majority or not? Proportionally, the vast majority of Kurds are in this majority. They have grievances, they have problems, they have demands. They are respected."

The party's Diyarbakır provincial chairman was sending a similar signal to Kurds by referring to Meral Akşener's religious inclination (Yeni Şafak, 2023). However, this statement was made four months before the May 2023 elections. Five months after the elections, he resigned along with the entire provincial organisation. Meanwhile, over ten thousand members left the party due to the shift on the Kurdish issue. Salim Ensarioğlu, a renowned Kurdish politician who is also a member of parliament, left the party for the same reasons. Former MP Hasan Subaşı, known for his more moderate comments on the Kurdish issue during his parliamentary tenure, resigned from the party. After his resignation, Subaşı gave an interview, criticising the Good Party for abandoning its centre-right position and competing with other nationalist parties (Büyüktanır, 2023).

This transformation underscores the Good Party's journey through Türkiye's political landscape, grappling with its centrist claims against the backdrop of nationalist roots. The party's evolving narrative, particularly around contentious issues like the Kurdish

question, mirrors broader debates on national identity, citizenship, and the intersection of religion and statehood in Türkiye. As the Good Party redefines its stance, it confronts the perennial challenge of aligning its foundational ethos with the shifting dynamics of Türkiye's political discourse, striving for a balance between its diverse constituencies and ideological imperatives.

Assessing the Good Party's Ideological Direction

The question of whether the Good Party has abandoned its centrist ambitions remains open. Recent shifts toward nationalist rhetoric suggest a potential strategic realignment, yet it is uncertain if the party can afford further ideological changes without risking cohesion. The departure of 80 founders and five of the 43 elected MPs post-May elections underscores the fragility within its ranks. The challenge of attracting significant new membership to offset these losses suggests the Good Party might be approaching the limits of its operational and ideological capacity.

The transformation in Meral Akşener's rhetoric mirrors the demographic profile of the Good Party's supporters: urban, middle to upper-income, and leaning towards a secular-nationalist ideology. This base finds its second political home in the CHP, highlighting the Good Party's struggle to appeal to the traditional centre-right constituents, who are typically lower-income and rural. Akşener's strategy appears focused on retaining the party's existing voters amidst navigating the post-CHP alliance landscape independently.

The Good Party, through its alliance with the CHP, previously offered a political refuge for voters dissatisfied with certain CHP policies yet prioritised opposition to the government over intra-alliance differences. The party's decision to field its candidates against the CHP in upcoming local elections introduces a critical test, particularly in battleground regions like Istanbul. This move risks splitting the opposition vote, potentially benefiting the AK Party. The response of former Good Party voters to this new strategy will be crucial, spotlighting the delicate balance the party must strike between adhering to its evolving ideological stance and maintaining electoral viability.

Electoral Challenges

There are several challenges both short-term and long-term facing the Good Party. On the long run, the issue of a distinct identity remains problematic. Initially, the Good Party anticipated crafting an identity distinct from the CHP, envisioning this autonomy to emerge post-regime change, with Meral Akşener leading as prime minister. This strategy aimed at broadening the party's appeal through governance benefits and internal unity. Although plausible, this outcome did not materialize, positioning the upcoming elections as a crucial determinant of the Good Party's standalone capability and future trajectory.

There may be some opportunities for the Good Party as it moves away from the centre with more chances to sway the urban youth. Then again, Türkiye is changing and with the change in demographics the voter profile could change drastically in the long haul. Capitalising on the nationalist secular urban youth may be a tactical political calculation for now but given high immigration rates and high birth rates among immigrants, the Good Party may be passing a chance to have a larger footprint among a multicultural country.

In the shorter term, the Good Party faces a backlash over political choices it made recently. The first is its ambivalence and drastic U-turns at critical moments. The most memorable of these was in March 2023, when Meral Akşener left the table of six where the candidate of the opposition alliance had been chosen as Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. The day after this meeting, she criticised the CHP and the Table of Six alliance in very harsh words, openly calling on the mayors of Ankara and Istanbul to take the initiative and run for the presidency despite their party, the CHP. Only three days after this speech, Meral Akşener returned to the table, and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu was declared as the candidate. Nowadays, Akşener harshly criticises and engages in polemics with the mayors of Istanbul and Ankara, whom she had openly supported to take the reins of the country.

Another obstacle for the Good Party is that it is no longer having the monopoly of right-wing opposition politics. When the party was founded in 2017, it was the first party to be established after a long break and to participate actively in the political scene. However, the Future Party in 2019, the Deva Party in 2020 and finally, the Victory Party, founded in 2021, target similar right-wing opposition constituencies. Moreover, a new party

is expected to join this chorus towards the end of 2024 under the leadership of Yavuz Ağralıoğlu, who also left the Good Party.

However, in addition to these parties, the Good Party has another major rival, namely Ekrem İmamoğlu. The latter's electoral performance could influence Good Party voter loyalty, especially if he secures a substantial victory over the CHP. Conversely, a defeat might see him lead the CHP, potentially attracting Good Party voters. Amidst an identity crisis, the Good Party contemplates a nationalist coalition as a potential strategy, despite ideological differences. However, aligning with a nationalist bloc could undermine its centre-right aspirations, challenging the party's foundational principles.

In this context, the importance of the Istanbul elections for the Good Party increases for two reasons. The first and most fundamental reason is that the Istanbul elections have the atmosphere of a general election. In local elections, no city reflects the mood of Turkish politics as much as Istanbul. Although there has been a divergence between the election results in Istanbul and the general election results in Türkiye in recent years, Istanbul still attracts heightened public attention. It is a heterogeneous metropolis with a strong representation of all views and identities. It is in this city that the Good Party will face its litmus test, as it is contesting without an alliance for the first time.

Akşener's party may achieve some success in some other cities based on the personal profile of the candidates. However, the Istanbul elections will determine whether there is a party success that exceeds the success of the candidates. In the 2018 and 2023 general elections, when the Good Party had previously gained around 10% of the vote in Türkiye, its Istanbul vote was around 8%. It seems difficult to exceed this level in the elections to be held at the end of March. A small loss in votes can also be tolerated. However, in scenarios where it falls below 5%, it is not difficult to foresee that there will be new earthquakes within the Good Party that are likely to lead the party to destruction. If it gets a vote close to or below that of the Victory Party, its main rival, this would be a harbinger of a much deeper crisis.

Conclusion

The Good Party, established in opposition to the MHP's alliance with the AK Party, set out with a diverse founding team led by Meral Akşener. It aimed to blend nationalist vigour with the centre-right appeal, navigating through Türkiye's multifaceted political landscape. Despite securing a significant vote share early on, the party has struggled to expand its influence or fully realise its ambitious goals. The post-2023 period, marked by internal challenges and a shift towards more nationalistic rhetoric, represents a pivotal moment for the party as it seeks to redefine its identity and strategy in the absence of alliance support.

The journey of the Good Party, from its foundation to the present day, illustrates the complexities of Türkiye's political environment. The party's initial inclusive approach, aiming to unite diverse voter bases, has gradually evolved, reflecting the changing dynamics within Türkiye's society and political sphere. The Good Party's efforts to address contentious issues such as the Kurdish question while balancing its historical nationalist roots with a broader centrist appeal underscore the intricate dance of political positioning in a deeply polarised landscape.

As the Good Party ventures into future elections independently, its ability to maintain its voter base, manage ideological shifts, and navigate the competitive political arena will be critical. The emergence of new political parties and figures, alongside the evolving preferences of the Turkish electorate, presents both challenges and opportunities. The Good Party's responses to these dynamics, particularly in strategic electoral battlegrounds like Istanbul, will be instrumental in determining its trajectory and its role within Türkiye's opposition landscape.

The road ahead for the Good Party is fraught with uncertainty. The party's struggle to reconcile its nationalist origins with a centrist, inclusive platform has led to internal discord and ideological ambiguity. The potential for ideological realignment, either towards a more pronounced nationalist stance or a reinvigorated centrist approach, remains an open question. The outcome of this ideological and strategic recalibration will not only shape the party's future but also impact the broader contours of opposition politics in Türkiye.

Ultimately, the Good Party stands at a crossroads, facing the dual challenge of defining its ideological identity and securing electoral success in an increasingly fragmented political landscape. Whether it can successfully navigate these challenges and emerge as a formidable force in Turkish politics remains to be seen. The upcoming elections, particularly in Istanbul, will be a litmus test for the Good Party's resilience and its ability to adapt and thrive amid the shifting sands of Türkiye's political terrain.

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