

# The New Leader for the Old CHP: Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu

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## ABSTRACT

*The CHP constitutes a crucial place in Turkish political life. From its establishment to its closure after the military intervention of September 12, 1980, the CHP occasionally became a partner of coalition governments and came to power alone. The party was reopened and became more powerful after merging with the SHP in the 1990s. After the resignation of Baykal from party chairmanship in May 2010, whether new party chair would be able to extend the party base and become electorally successful has been started to be discussed. The new party chair Kılıçdaroğlu has a differentiated view of society, politics, democracy and freedom compared to Baykal. But then, the main problem is whether this difference would be able to turn the CHP into an alternative political power against the AK Party.*

The election of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, an Istanbul deputy, as the party chair at the latest congress of the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP) drew the public's attention to the future of the party. Those who call themselves social democrats overwhelmingly believed that with Baykal as party chair, the CHP had no chance of success at the next elections. The motive behind Kılıçdaroğlu's election reflected this concern. Observers of Turkish politics have closely analyzed and written about the CHP. There are two central reasons for this keen interest in the place of the CHP in the future of Turkish politics. First, the CHP's roots are grounded in the foundation of the Republic. And second, the CHP has the strongest chance against the current governing party, the AK Party. However, despite the CHP's strong historical tradition and social base, political analysts still question the CHP's ability to be elected and form a government, as it has been unable to do so for almost a quarter of a century.

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The reasons why the CHP, a center-left party, has been unable to be elected and form a government have frequently been debated by political analysts, particularly in academia. Analysts first point to the ideology of the party and its infra-

structure as main reasons for this failure. Second, they also claim that the party's ruling elite and Baykal's exclusionist political style have negatively impacted any chances of success.

The process, which has marked a new phase for the CHP, began with the sex scandal videotape of Deniz Baykal being disseminated on the internet and his subsequent resignation, followed by the election of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu as the CHP party chair. Kılıçdaroğlu's election, apparently, set aside concerns that the future of the party was in jeopardy, as it was solely based on the role of the previous party leader. In fact, Baykal's views on Turkish politics and society increasingly were seen as outdated and not in line with the needs and wants of the Turkish people in the 2000s. So, the CHP was in need of a new leadership and a new direction. Kılıçdaroğlu was a crucial actor in expressing the need for change coming from its social democrat base. In other words, the only way to create the momentum for change in the CHP was with the new leadership of Kılıçdaroğlu.

The focus of this article is to illustrate how Turkish politics and the CHP can evolve under Kılıçdaroğlu's leadership. First, the historic beginnings of the CHP before 1980s will be described. Second, the CHP years under Baykal's leadership will be analyzed. Lastly, the place of the CHP in the future in Turkish politics will be considered, particularly in light of Kılıçdaroğlu's and his team's political vision.

### **Remembering Baykal's CHP**

Despite the CHP's almost century-long history, it was sidelined from Turkish politics by the military intervention of September 12, 1980. However, the September 12 military regime did not allow for the foundation of a party with the name used prior to the coup. A subsequent constitutional amendment allowed political parties to reclaim the previously banned names, allowing the CHP to regaining its political life in the 1990s. Therefore the political history of the CHP has two phases: pre-1980 and post-1990.

In the pre-1980s phase, as the Republic's founding party, the goal of CHP was to create a society that followed the political and cultural modernization project,

inspired by and under the leaderships of Mustafa Kemal and İsmet İnönü. Until Ecevit's leadership in the 1970s, the CHP sacrificed the needs of the people for the interests of the state. Moreover, the CHP's rivals accused it of being a leftist-party. However, İsmet İnönü answered these critics by using the term "left-of-center" and intended to make the party's ideological identity clear, by distinguishing it from the extreme left. His move unintentionally prevented the socialist Turkish Labor Party, which was established by twelve trade unionist workers, from growing.<sup>1</sup> In addition, this move led the CHP towards being a party of the people rather than a party of the state. After the military intervention of March 2, 1971, Ecevit was elected and replaced İnönü. At that point, the party adopted the democratic left ideology. It is during this same period that the party centered its orientation on the needs and demands of the people. The CHP also began viewing society through an economic-based lense, like other Western social democrat parties at the time. Those who criticized the CHP's new orientation left it and established a Kemalist-statist, nationalist party.

After the military intervention of September 12, 1980, the CHP was shut down. Numerous center-left political parties were founded as successors, such as the Social Democracy Party (Sosyal Demokrasi Partisi, SODEP) and the People's Party (Halkçı Parti, HP). Out of these political parties, only the Social Democratic Populist Party (SHP), which was a fusion of two parties, survived the world of Turkish politics until the mid-1990s. After the constitutional amendment allowing for the reestablishment of parties that were previously shut down, the CHP was reopened. On September 9, 1992, Deniz Baykal was elected as the party chair. The SHP abolished itself in February 1995 and was merged into the CHP. In the first congress after this merger, Baykal became the party chair and replaced the previous chair Hikmet Çetin. The SHP's political orientation was more liberal-left-leaning with a more global understanding of society and politics as compared to the CHP. In fact, under Baykal's chairmanship, the party's political approach was encountering difficulties in reading the new socio-economic modernization that was consolidated under the leadership of the Motherland Party and its leader Turgut Özal. As a result, after the mid-1990s, the center-left in Turkey with the CHP rapidly fell into a crisis of legitimacy and representation.

The CHP neither felt a need to change its name nor went through a process of redefining its ideological orientation, similar to the one in the mid-1970s. The party still formed its political platform on the basis of Cold War paradigms. After the election of Baykal as the leader of the CHP, the party did not meet the 10

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percent minimum election threshold; thus, failed to acquire any parliamentary seats in the general elections of 1999. This caused Baykal to resign from the party. However, shortly after, he was reelected at an extraordinary congress. Until the sex tape scandal broke in the news, Baykal and his team's tenure at the helm of the CHP is an excellent example

of what a social democrat party should not do when it comes to ideological positioning, reordering of the party's organizational structure, and understanding of leadership.

The political thinking in Baykal's CHP was based on an 'us' versus 'them' distinction, which effectively excluded the masses. This approach largely affected the ideological positioning and organizational structure of the party. Baykal's leadership and organization of the CHP had never been based on a democratic, pluralistic decision-making process and its methods of application were distinct from other social democratic parties. Despite the fact that the CHP was an elected legal body, as a consequence of rigid and mandatory provisions of the law on political parties, only Baykal and the Secretary General, Önder Sav, had sufficient power to determine the organizational structure and political ideology of the party. Their leadership style was monolithic, exclusionary, and domineering, especially in their approach to Turkey's political, social, and cultural issues. From the re-establishment of the CHP in 1992 until Baykal's resignation in 2010, the party was characterized by authoritarian, militaristic, and bureaucratic methods to reshape and educate Turkish society. The CHP always placed the interest of the state over the demands of Turkey's citizens. Especially in the 2000s, the party did not listen and try to understand the Turkish people. The CHP was unaware of what the Turkish people wanted and did not know where their interests lay. The party's attitude and political position should be discussed in the post-modern military intervention of February 28, 1997 - context. The CHP held an introverted, nationalistic view and it generally remained distant from the demands of democratization and liberalization coming from society. The party also tended to side with the military regarding the relations between military and civil authorities. For this reason, from the 1990s to the 2000s, the exclusionary politics of Baykal and Sav gave them a warped vision of society, as they viewed everything as party politics. During Baykal's tenure, the party viewed itself as a guardian of the Republic, and, therefore, could not have been a people's party. Another dilemma for the CHP



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under Baykal's leadership was that it never garnered sufficient support to have enough votes for it to accede to the government.

### **New Blood for the Old CHP: Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and His Political Thinking**

The election of Kılıçdaroğlu to the CHP leadership can be seen as new blood or a new beginning for the party. In the world of Turkish politics this was an important development because it ran counter to the unwritten code that “Baykal equaled the CHP,” as Fuat Keyman wrote in a commentary.<sup>2</sup> A new leader for a party can motivate political parties and their supporters. However, what the change in the CHP entails should be analyzed and discussed. To do so, we will evaluate Kılıçdaroğlu's speeches, which provide a useful source in determining the new potential directions of the new CHP's political discourse.

The first speech we will examine to evaluate his political thinking was at the party congress where he was elected as a leader.<sup>3</sup> Careful consideration should be given to his concrete projects to fight against Turkey's impoverishment and corruption as well as the revival of a social state. These can be seen as characteristic of his political thinking. However, he was unable to clearly define Turkey's current political, social, and cultural problems. And he was inefficient in presenting his solutions to these problems. In addition, he made no remarkable evaluations on Turkey's democratization movements, particularly regarding the Kurdish question, relations with the EU, and the dilemma of the contested dominance of appointed and elected military and civilian bureaucracy over civil politics. His

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lack of policies on these issues makes us doubt whether the CHP will be transformed under Kılıçdaroğlu.

During his speech before his election, he underlined that the CHP should have been a center-left party. Although he did

not directly state it, he emphasized certain aspects of what politics, society, and economics meant for the CHP, which had been forgotten in recent years.<sup>4</sup> He criticized the CHP and the center-left in Turkey from the perspective of an insider. Kılıçdaroğlu implicitly expressed his wishes that the classical understanding of politics that the CHP held should change. His message was mainly that “this order should change.” What he wanted to say is that the “new order” should be like a social state, which defends the rights of the poor, as Ecevit did in the mid-1970s. And it should be characterized by a democratic left ideological orientation. He stated that the CHP should express the needs for this new order. In addition, he pointed out the importance of an organized opposition and his criticism of the trade unions’ current situation and the center-left who no longer expressed the concerns of their grassroots members. When comparing his discourse before his election with his speech at the congress, he still remains timid when it comes to the discourse of the left. The reason for this is that his liberal-left discourse has been a target of criticism since he became the leader of the CHP. So, he has moderated his discourse.

Kılıçdaroğlu has not developed a clear position on Turkey’s relations with the EU. He oversimplified the Kurdish question, which is a weak spot in Turkey’s democratization process. He considers it a problem only stemming from economic difficulties. He is far from understanding and accepting what identity politics represents in post-modern times and globalization. In this sense, during his speech at the congress, he did not stand out as an outstanding political thinker of liberal-left politics. However, there is a possibility that he was operating based on a conscious political strategy to overemphasize the economy but underemphasize other political issues in Turkey, which include The Kurdish question, constitutional amendments, democratization, and liberalization. If this assumption is correct, his oversimplification reflects narrow political thinking. In general, it may be too early to fully evaluate the extent of Kılıçdaroğlu’s political thinking. However, if we consider Kılıçdaroğlu’s discourse, it will not be easy for the CHP to really change under his leadership. During a short interview, his views on the issue of women wearing headscarves makes us question his way of thinking. His answer to the question on whether women with headscarves would be

able to attend universities was “We will provide the support to the people. We will provide an opportunity for everyone to go to school. No one should wonder about this. We will solve this problem.”<sup>5</sup>

However, after he gave his speech to the press, the party’s headquarter felt the need to correct his words. In the corrected version, Kılıçdaroğlu<sup>6</sup> expressed that he had never said anything to assure women would be able to wear headscarves at the universities. His approach to the headscarf issue is more moderate than Baykal, but still, he backed away from expressing a solution based on freedom and individual rights.

In light of the views expressed by Kılıçdaroğlu on a number of key political issues in Turkey today, his political thinking is nowhere near providing a new momentum for the CHP. It is safe to say that this problem does not only concern Kılıçdaroğlu. And, there is still a possibility that Kılıçdaroğlu can still grow politically and give the CHP the leader it needs. However, it will not be easy to persuade the party assembly and its voters to turn away from their learned patterns of behavior, inherited ideological baggage and exclusionary politics.

Here, we can turn to the analysis of Sencer Ayata, a respected sociologist and recently elected member of the party assembly. Ayata’s conceptualization of “new middle class” is striking. When he was evaluating the ‘republican demonstrations,’ he mentioned that new social supporters were educated, and hailed from the working and new middle class. In this new phase for the CHP, this class holds a crucial importance. This new class living in urban centers should reach out to other segments of society.<sup>7</sup> The CHP has for many years wanted to appeal to these social groups. However, it is still not clearly stated in what ways this new middle class can appeal and establish a relation with the poor living in suburbs and how this can be extended to the party’s social base. The living conditions of the urban poor and their deep-rooted values should be better understood to be able to improve their economic situation. Only if the CHP can develop a political platform to achieve these goals will they be able to attract the masses into the party.

In this sense, Kılıçdaroğlu’s speech at the congress was strikingly different, as it focused more on the economy and much less on a rigid secularist, statist, and authoritarian discourse. However, when his emphasis on alleviating poverty was put set aside, his discourse failed to satisfy the people’s expectations that he could be more than ordinary.

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## Can Kılıçdaroğlu Turn the CHP into an Electorally Successful Party?

One way to evaluate the electoral success of the new CHP is to observe whether it extends its social base by becoming a stronger party in electoral politics. The first part of the question is: “will Kılıçdaroğlu transform the CHP into a party that can challenge the AK Party?” If in the next election, the CHP can be successful, Kılıçdaroğlu will have satisfied what was expected out of him. So the second part of this question is “can Kılıçdaroğlu turn the CHP into an electorally successful party?” To answer this question, we need to mention that the CHP is still structured around a classical framework and the balance of power that still exists within the party organization gives Secretary General Sav a dominant position, extending from the center to the periphery.

Kılıçdaroğlu was a former high-ranked bureaucrat before entering into politics. He decided to become involved in politics based on the invitation of Baykal. He was subsequently nominated to the Istanbul metropolitan municipality mayorship in the latest local elections in 2009. He, soon after, became the group deputy chairman of the party. After Baykal’s resignation, he was elected as party leader. His rapid rise and achievements in a short time period may cause him trouble. In particular, Kılıçdaroğlu may not have a lot of room to maneuver in and it will depend on how much space Sav is willing to give him. Sav has been the second man in the party for almost a quarter century. This will definitely be a challenge for Kılıçdaroğlu. There is no reason for the CHP to automatically look for a new leader if Kılıçdaroğlu fails to achieve an electoral victory. Kılıçdaroğlu has the potential to lead the CHP towards an electoral success, considering the media’s support and a certain degree of popularity, as the government’s attraction begins to lose ground. There is a significant portion of the electorate who is in favor of Kılıçdaroğlu and looks forward to a positive result for the CHP. However, if he fails, his legitimacy will be questioned by the electorate and Deniz Baykal in particular.

It is important to note that if we consider Kılıçdaroğlu’s discourse, which reflects his understanding of Turkish society and politics, it will not be easy for him to satisfy these expectations. He cannot control the organization the way the Secretary General Sav does. The political thinking of the Secretary General is just like in the 1950s. Kılıçdaroğlu’s name represents simplicity, honesty, and modesty. However, in a context where the political parties are so rigidly competitive, it will not be enough to succeed. What is required for success is not only electing a new leader but also an ideological transformation.

In fact, the CHP has the potential to become a liberal-leftist party. Today’s more universal, peaceful political thinking and the views of the liberated left which use

a pro-dialogue approach just exist in the party agenda for the CHP. This party should even use the leftist style of self-critique to do what is needed. Instead, the CHP is opting for the easy solution, which is to criticize the AK Party and survive only in relation to it. Although Kılıçdaroğlu did not inherit the Baykal's 'laicist' discourse, he inherited the CHP's oversimplified understanding of political critique, which is to only criticize Erdogan and the AK Party.

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The CHP with Kılıçdaroğlu should never forget that if economic injustice, social inequality, and intolerance cannot be eliminated, there will always be a need and hope for the left. For this reason, the CHP should not define itself with respect to its opposition to the AK Party and criticizing the right. The party should analyze why people vote for the right and why the 'masses' still cannot come together on the left. Another issue is that Kılıçdaroğlu is trying to reach the 'masses' only through an economic approach but is not touching upon their political concerns. His emphasis on poverty can attract the voters in the next election, and possibly will. But, this is not enough to obtain a majority rule and to establish the CHP as a liberal-left party. Therefore, the wave of transition the CHP is riding should move it towards social democracy, which includes a fundamental change in the political culture of the party. However, if the CHP cannot transform its identity and become a social democrat party as well as internalizing the values that accompany this political ideology, it does not seem likely that the CHP will grow stronger.

It can be said that Kılıçdaroğlu made a good move by moving away from the 'laicist' political thinking of Baykal. In Turkey, there is an established consensus on Ataturk's personality and what he achieved for the country. For this reason, going back to the CHP's roots is not a forward-looking approach for the CHP's political agenda. It should continue to protect Ataturk's historical personality, but the CHP should move forward in accordance with contemporary social democracy ideals, as Ecevit did in the 1970s. The CHP under Baykal's leadership was stuck in the mindset of the 1940s. In this respect, the party should be neither in historical denial nor should it completely indulge in history. Kılıçdaroğlu should spend his time realigning the party along social-democratic lines, so that he can best answer the needs of the Turkish people in the 2000s, for Turkey has gone through an important socio-economic transformation in the past decade. If he

can fight against the supporters of status quo, he can succeed. Only this can bring a success to the CHP and make people believe in its transformation.

### **A Referendum Test for the CHP and Kılıçdaroğlu**

Turkey's constitutional referendum was the first test for the CHP under the leadership of Kılıçdaroğlu. Before addressing the results of the referendum itself, we need to look at how Kılıçdaroğlu and the CHP staff considered the proposed constitutional reforms ahead of the referendum. Kılıçdaroğlu's dialogue with the voters, his messages during his campaign, his views on the expansion of freedom, as well as his stance on state-society relations of the party and its leader – all reveal crucial clues regarding the future of the CHP.

The CHP objected the proposed constitutional changes since they were first introduced for discussion in the parliament. The CHP's position was against the changes, and consequently it tried to convince its voters to vote "No." The CHP's campaign, led by Kılıçdaroğlu, evolved around the party's already known discourse, rather than the proposed reforms of the 26 articles of the Constitution on which the referendum was being held. Apparently, the CHP was only against reforms on the structure and functions of the Supreme Council of Judges and Public Prosecutors (HSYK) and the Constitutional Court. However, neither the CHP nor Kılıçdaroğlu were successful in explaining the juridical logic and basis behind this objection, aside from arguing that the AKP would acquire the power of the judiciary. Instead, unrelated to the constitutional changes, its campaign agenda was dominated by its opposition to the AK Party government and Erdoğan's leadership. As a result, the referendum turned out to be a vote of confidence for the government's policies. Kılıçdaroğlu intentionally aimed to criticize the government and Erdoğan about macro political, economic, and social issues in almost every meeting and to convince the Turkish people to reject the changes.

He sometimes used very strong words to criticize the AK Party. In addition, he made some populist promises to increase votes for the "no" vote. He brought up the controversial issue of the general amnesty regarding the Kurdish question and argued that the CHP is the only party that can solve the headscarf issue. However, these statements were not really based on reality; rather, they were tactics to increase the votes. His comments on the "Villa Controversy" backfired, as he was trying to point out the differences in Turkey between the rich and poor.

The outcome of the referendum was largely in favor of the "yes." The constitutional changes were accepted with 58% of the vote. This was neither a success nor

a defeat for Kılıçdaroğlu and the CHP. Nevertheless, the only obvious result is that this referendum did not provide the result that Kılıçdaroğlu and the CHP hoped for, which was a vote against the AK Party government. Despite Kılıçdaroğlu's criticism of Erdoğan, according to the survey made right after the referendum, 46.8% of the voters -almost one fourth of the total voters- who voted for "yes" stated that they voted for Erdoğan in the referendum. But 58.2% of the people in that survey stated that the reason why they voted "yes" was for the expansion of freedom in Turkey.<sup>8</sup> This figure illustrates that people were not really interested in the message expressed by Kılıçdaroğlu and the CHP during the campaign process. But it should be said that 42% of the "no" vote said that to an extent they supported Kılıçdaroğlu's campaign. Interestingly, an important proportion of votes for the "no" came from the West and Western coast of Turkey, revealing that the CHP is still a regional party or a coastal party with a new leader. Voters in the southeastern part of Turkey did not believe in the promises made by the CHP for general amnesty. While voters in the middle of Anatolia did not believe the promises of the CHP to abolish the head scarf ban.

The simple reality concerning Kılıçdaroğlu is that the CHP's loyal voters accepted him as their new leader. The test for Kılıçdaroğlu as the CHP's new leader has just begun. His visit to Brussels to develop the party's relations with the EU, his speech on the solution of the headscarf issue,<sup>9</sup> and his critiques of the 1960 coup right after the referendum should all be taken into consideration. These positions are a reflection that he has the potential to move the CHP towards the liberal-left line.

## Conclusion

Although it is hard to give immense meaning to the change of the CHP's leadership because of the method of change and Kılıçdaroğlu and his team's political thinking, this change will undoubtedly add color to the competition between Turkish political parties. The CHP with Baykal could control the center-left block alone, despite many new parties' attempts to claim this political position. Politicians who were fed up with the CHP and Baykal's political understanding sought to establish parties but were unsuccessful or could not survive the test of time. The change of leadership within the CHP has temporarily ended the search for a new party. Instead, it has opened a new phase for the CHP, and potentially the center-left in Turkey.

This change is important not just for the CHP but also for other powers on the left and right. Kılıçdaroğlu may have reluctantly contributed to the AK Party's

need to strengthen their efforts to become a member of the EU and accelerate the democratization process. In other words, if the CHP with Kılıçdaroğlu constitutes a potential threat to the AK Party in the next election, this may have a positive influence on the AK Party's need to redouble their efforts to join the EU and to further democratize Turkey.

Kılıçdaroğlu's poverty discourse could cause the AK Party to revise and reinvigorate its social policies. One of the most important gaps which remains after eight years of the AK Party in power is its inability to reach the levels of western countries in eliminating social and economic income inequality. It seems that Kılıçdaroğlu's discourse is stimulating the AK Party in this area as well. All in all, the CHP with Kılıçdaroğlu will introduce a new competitive era in Turkish politics. It remains to be seen whether this will be used for the benefits of the party and the state.

### Endnotes

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