The June 24 Elections: On Political Change and the Future of Turkey

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ABSTRACT *On June 24, 2018, two elections that determine Turkey's future took place. By focusing on the political transformation that shaped the June 24 elections and produced its outcome, this commentary attempts to show the factors that led to the new system in Turkey, through historical and sociological processes. Furthermore, it attempts to discuss the future projection of Turkish politics in the light of the election results.*

> "Each society is a construction, a constitution, a creation of a world, of its own world. Its own identity is nothing but this 'system of interpretation,' this world it creates."[1]

Introduction

On June 24, 2018, two intertwined elections took place simultaneously: the electorate settled the presidential race and decided who would represent them in Parliament. At the same time, the 'presidency system of government' officially took effect. Another significant part of the June 24 elections was the competition between various alliances comprised of multiple political parties. In this regard, the contest primarily pitted the People's Alliance (*Cumhur İttifakı*), which consists of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AK Party), the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) and the Great Union Party (*Büyük Birlik Partisi*, BBP) and received 53.7 percent of the vote, against the Nation Alliance (*Millet İttifakı*), which won 33.9 percent with the support of the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), the İyi Party (İYİP), the Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi*, SP) and the Democratic Party (DP). The Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP), which was part of neither alliance, passed the 10 percent election threshold by receiving 11.7 percent of the vote to send its representatives to Parliament.

The election fielded six presidential candidates: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

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won the race with 52.6 percent, the CHP's Muharrem İnce received 30.6 percent of the vote and finished second, the HDP's Selahattin Demirtaş received 8.4 percent, the İyi Party's Meral Akşener received 7.3 percent, the SP's Temel Karamollaoğlu received 0.9 percent, and the Homeland Party's (*Vatan Partisi*) Doğu Perinçek received 0.2 percent of the vote.

Instead of providing a quantitative analysis of the election results, this commentary will concentrate on the political transformation that shaped the June 24 elections and produced its outcome, and what it signifies. In doing so, I will first touch upon the political logic of the June 24 elections. Later, I will discuss the various factors that generated the outcome within a historical and sociological context. I will focus on the AK Party, which has been the dominant political subject of the election and its results, to describe the movement with an eye on its competitors. Finally, I will concentrate on the nature of Turkey's political trans-

formation, which the AK Party has pioneered, and its future direction.

The Political Logic of the June 24 Elections

First and foremost, the June 24 elections in Turkey represented a single decision made over two channels. In this regard, each channel had unique qualities that affected how the process played out: it is an indisputable fact that the decision making process in the presidential race, in which 'personal' factors played a key role, and the parliamentary election, which determined which party's representatives would serve in the Parliament, were completely different. The most obvious evidence that supports that claim is the gap between the number of votes cast for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his party. The same goes for Muharrem İnce, Meral Akşener and Selahattin Demirtaş, and their respective parties.

At the same time, it is necessary to take into account the campaign rhetoric that Erdoğan's opponents in the presidential race adopted and the political logic it reflected. Whereas the People's Alliance backed a single contender, the Nation Alliance fielded three presidential candidates. The electorate perceived this decision as an attempt to prevent a victory for Erdoğan alone –which candidates backed by the Nation Alliance openly indicated at campaign events. Although leaders of the political parties that formed the Nation Alliance asserted that they were united by

shared principles, it was noteworthy that they dissolved the alliance immediately after the election. Furthermore, the İyi Party's initial assessment of the election results was that partnering with the Republican People's Party was a serious mistake.

Obviously, individuals running for public office can reasonably convey the message that they, rather than their opponent(s), are the best choice. This is not only natural but also legitimate and democratic. What happened ahead of the June 24 election in Turkey, however, was something completely different. All three presidential candidates of the Nation Alliance made the following assumption to reach inaccurate conclusions: the People's Alliance, they posited, supported a candidate and a new, 'authoritarian' system of government that would institutionalize the 'one-man rule.' Personal attacks against Erdoğan, the man who had already been in power for sixteen years, would serve to deny him the presidency, the argument went.

Unfortunately for them, there was a serious paradox here: they critiqued Erdoğan and his party as an 'authoritarian' figure and political system respectively, by positioning themselves as the dominant political figure of that line of criticism. Statements made by İnce and Akşener, in particular, support this claim. Both candidates pledged to issue 'orders' and provide 'instructions' if elected. In this regard, it was noteworthy that İnce threatened to strip off the ranks of the Second Army Commander

who applauded Erdoğan's critical remarks on İnce. Although the Nation Alliance candidates promised to restore and improve the parliamentary system in an effort to remedy this 'authoritarian' slide, their message fell on deaf ears, mainly because restoration would take a long time and there were no agreed-upon principles to guide this effort.

Similar problems surrounded the opposition's assessment of the election results. In line with tradition, the opposition parties were quick to claim that institutions responsible for conducting free and fair elections had engaged in election fraud. In the end, however, even the same people rejected those claims. Although this isn't the proper platform to discuss the impact of the election results on the CHP, suffice to say that the decline in the party's popular support to 22.6 percent, compared to Muharrem İnce's 30.6 percent, fueled not just intra-party tensions but also made İnce look like a new source of hope for the Turkish Left. As mentioned above, İnce's individual performance was the outcome of a personal competition between the various candidates. Although his performance was indeed successful for a first-time candidate, it is important to acknowledge that it was, at the same time, a reflection of the broader political context. In this sense, İnce's performance does not necessarily suggest that he could win the same number of votes in the future if he were to take over as CHP chairman. After all, İnce received some 'borrowed votes' in the presidential race, just as some CHP sup-

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porters opted to vote for other candidates and political parties.

Western Hostility and the July 15 Coup Attempt

Which factors contributed to the June 24 victory of a political party whose leader had won 15 elections and referendums over the past 16 years –despite a minor decline in popularity? To answer that question, I will discuss the Western hostility towards Turkey, as personified by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and the July 15, 2016 coup attempt. Building on that discussion, I will offer some projections for the future.

Before analyzing the impact of the July 15 coup attempt in Turkey, it is necessary to identify the historical and sociological forces behind this uprising –which took place just as the Turkish people declared an end to the era of military coups. Many narratives have emerged to account for what happened on July 15, 2016. Those narratives, however, have notably failed to take into account the

structural mechanisms that paved the way for this potentially catastrophic event. Needless to say, it is quite difficult to explain how the coup plotters dared to rise up against the elected government without taking into consideration the historical flashpoints in state-society relations in Turkey.

Historically, the Turkish state has functioned according to what Kınalızade Ali Efendi (1511-1571) famously described as the 'circle of justice.'[2] The state is located at the center of this circle due to (and as a result of) its distributive functions. In turn, this reveals the nature of the political ground on which the state operates. The distributive state can only operate on the basis of a notion of politics that serves to make decisions regarding the distribution of tangible resources, i.e. wealth, and intangible resources, i.e. status, positions, titles, and resources derived from an authority. The state's central role and superiority make it possible to influence society in two ways. To adopt sociologist Michael Mann's terminology with minor changes, the state functions by (i) creating channels within society to generate state authority, or (ii) implementing policies designed to influence society.[3] The first option reflects the ability of ruling elites to showcase their power to govern without entering into routine and institutionalized negotiations with various social groups. The second option, which Mann calls 'infrastructural power,' reflects the state's intentions to implement political decisions that affect large groups of people. According to Michael Mann, modern states

are relatively weak in the first situation and strong in the latter. My position is that the opposite is true for Turkey: the state is strong in the first sense, but weaker in the latter.

Under the circumstances, the state, which traditionally positions itself at the center of the circle of justice, picked the first option when faced with the risk of losing its central role during the process of modernization and, specifically, due to Western impositions. The first scenario, however, made it necessary for the state to coordinate the four sources of power –political, military, ideological and economic.[4]

When the Ottoman Empire started to disintegrate, it lacked the power to bring together the aforementioned sources. Perhaps the only resource that it could effectively use was ideology –which lacked a coherent answer to the question how the state could be saved, and was divided between Ottomanists, Turkists, Islamists, Westernists and others. In this regard, the state's functional responsibilities as part of the circle of justice were limited. Instead, the emergence of a segmented social and political order encouraged the various groups competing to perform the state's traditional tasks to maintain that they actually were 'the state.' By extension, this situation made it possible for the state to consolidate political power and, at the same time, encouraged the various groups to demand the same kind of power.

Since then, the state has been considered a strategically important venue that must be conquered at all costs –a

battlefield between the ruling elites and those left outside. Just as the state influences society, however, society tends to influence the state –which is a possibility for groups capable of coordinating the use of the various sources of power.

In Turkey, the Gülenist Terror Organization (FETÖ) organized in various areas, starting with education, and adopted a strategy to infiltrate the state through the coordinated use of those resources of power. The post-July 15 court cases and available evidence support that claim.

The most profound impact of the July 15 coup attempt and the resulting change was that the channels of state power, which the AK Party exercised to influence society, were clogged. Concerns about the future of the state prevented the unclogging of said channels, leading to the endurance of non-democratic state-society relations. The failure of Western governments to fully support the political, legal and economic actions and measures that the AK Party took due to the July 15 coup attempt and their insulting attitude towards Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the rest of the ruling elites were another important component of the same problem.

It is possible to claim that the developments surrounding the coup and its aftermath were quite influential on the outcome of the June 24 elections: the electorate supported Erdoğan against the West. Their support wasn't just out of sympathy for the man himself but a reflection of the political reaction against the West, including the United States, out of concern for the state.

The Role of Nationalist Parties after the June 24 Elections

In this regard, the overall increase in nationalist votes, by which I mean the sum of MHP and İyi Party votes, cannot be considered independently of the process that I have discussed above. The MHP has traditionally been a political party that holds the survival of the state above all else and advocates radical measures for this purpose. The movement's decision to join the People's Alliance and offer unconditional support to Erdoğan's presidential campaign could be viewed as a result of its emphasis on Turkey's 'national identity' against the West. Obviously, the People's Alliance emerged for the purpose of cooperating in the elections. The driving force behind the MHP's rapprochement and alliance with the AK Party, however, was the AK Party's post-July 15 adoption of a political discourse with references to Islamic civilization –which I could describe as 'popular religious nationalism.' Without a doubt, this discourse did not emerge in the immediate aftermath of the July 15 coup attempt. Instead, it was the failure of the policy of 'opening' regarding the Kurdish question that facilitated its emergence. The July 15 coup attempt focused and tailored this discourse and made it possible for the MHP to find the AK Party politically acceptable.

The İyi Party, launched by former MHP politicians, was another part of

the post-election 'nationalist wave.' Members of the İyi Party leadership stated that they would be prepared to support the AK Party if the MHP sought to undermine its current alliance with the AK Party –which suggests that the nationalist wave could be consolidated in the long term. To be clear, the post-June 24 distribution of parliamentary seats appears to facilitate such an arrangement. But a potential cooperation between the two parties would depend on whether the AK Party's notion of 'religious nationalism' relies on a type of nationalism akin to the MHP's perspective that is at the expense of 'religion.'

This is where the HDP occupies a critical position. If the movement opts to give a nationalist color to the Kurdish Question, it stands to strengthen the reverse nationalist wave. The West should be expected to assume a position that takes this political dialectic into consideration. If it does not, the West will fuel the nationalist wave, which depends primarily on external, rather than domestic, factors. After all, nationalism represents an effort to link oneself to the process of globalization in ways that accommodate one's ontological necessities rather than a conscious, categorical reaction against globalization itself. This position manifests itself in President Erdoğan's famous motto: "The world is bigger than five!"

If the June 24 election actually sent a 'message' to the outside world, it was about the Turkish people's eagerness to be recognized and to participate in the globalization process. This in-

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terest should be expected to leverage the new system of government and serve as the basis of institutionalization. Without a doubt, the AK Party, which is the dominant subject of this process, must play the most definitive role here. For this purpose, it is necessary to take into consideration during the transition process that democracy is a framework for governance that operates on the basis of 'vagueness.'[5] At the same time, this assertion means that democracy could become its opposite –that the 'old' state establishment could seek to re-establish its hegemony. In this regard, it is possible to predict that the AK Party will maintain its political leverage under the new system as a dominant political subject to the extent that it preserves its founding motivation and philosophy.

AK Party's Policies Before and After the July 15 Coup Attempt

The AK Party combined the four aforementioned forms of power, i.e. political, military, ideological and economic, against the state elites, who considered themselves the true 'own-

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ers' of the state and came be to described as the 'guardianship regime,' to successfully establish and consolidate its hegemonic power. Within this context, the movement came to view politics as an effort to impose order, as a result of Turkey's political realities, and failed to prioritize the *infrastructure* of power, which we discussed above, completely –even though it expressed its interest in this point by referring to 'advanced democracy.' Needless to say, any effort to impose order requires the creation of hegemony in the Gramscian sense –that a certain party or part of the people assumes the leadership position.[6] This is what made the AK Party's 16-year tenure possible. Hegemony, however, cannot be viewed in conjunction with the state. Thinking along those lines, one would be prone to ignore that *the political power* prioritizes the state. In this sense, the July 15 coup attempt established that groups, which coordinate the various sources of power to generate their own social power, will not settle for remaining outside the realm of the state. In comparison to other political parties, it is possi-

ble to suggest that the AK Party is a movement that takes into account the aspects of hegemony that relate to society. The AK Party's efforts to integrate vast and alienated social groups into the political system, which are discussed below, attested to that fact.

It is necessary to point out, however, that the July 15 coup attempt against the AK Party government took place at a time when the same elements of power were used globally and in coordination with each other. By this, I mean what Carl Schmitt calls *Weltbürgerkrieg*[7] –the creation of 'new enemies' and 'new perceptions of hostility,' which takes place among non-state actors. In this sense, it is possible to integrate groups with social power, which are suitable for regional/global blueprints, into networks of power.

Although the AK Party performed the state's distributive tasks during its tenure, it failed to promote complete compliance with the circle of justice, which was described above, since it concentrated on tapping into the four sources of political power against the guardianship regime. Although not explicitly stated, putting in place the circle of justice had been part of the AK Party's agenda since its establishment. In an attempt to maintain its power, however, the movement adopted a state-centric approach to various issues without realizing that ideological partnership could give rise to an ambitious adversary with social power. On July 15, this adversary revealed its politically risky face by opting to participate in the *global civil war*.

The AK Party's post-July 15 analysis and policy choices suggest that it now seeks to use and consolidate the various sources of power without a partner. It is possible to view the AK Party's efforts to prevent another catastrophe akin to the July 15 coup attempt as rightful. Notwithstanding, the movement's efforts to facilitate the state's influence on society through itself, a political subject that exercises state power, could have two mutually exclusive outcomes. The first potential result is the creation of a broad base for democracy and the emergence of a maximum number of partners for state power. Without a doubt, this would be a question of generating infrastructural power. The second outcome could be the implementation of the AK Party's own policies without any routine and institutionalized bargaining with the various social groups, including their legitimate political representatives, as a result of the justifiable post-July 15 skepticism. It is important to note that this outcome would result in the weakening of democracy and transform the rival elements of social power into agents for the global civil war. The first scenario, or the consolidation of infrastructural power, would not only build on the July 15 resistance but also serve to reinforce and honor the AK Party's founding mission and political philosophy in the following ways.

AK Party's Success in the Political Sphere

First and foremost, the June 24 election established that the AK Party was/is a historically and completely unparalleled center party with a clear determination to seize the opportunity to function and govern as such. In Turkey, the first rule of being a center party is to maximize one's share of the vote and, therefore, to assume a strategic position that facilitates the creation of a rather wide popular base. In this regard, the AK Party –to lightly modify Giovanni Sartori's typology[8]– created a pragmatist-hegemonic party organization: it put ideology on the back burner when necessary in order to secure the support of various social groups for its policies. In terms of realpolitik, this represents the AK Party's "power" in multiple spheres.

In the *political* sphere, the AK Party's pragmatic side most closely resembles the Motherland Party (ANAP) under the leadership of former Turkish President Turgut Özal.[9] Nonetheless, today's historical conditions and political environment are quite different. At the time, ANAP concentrated on creating a new formula that would bring together different political tendencies on the basis of their "liberal" elements. The global rise of the New Right and the legacy of Turkey's military transition government led the masses to view the party as a hope –a sentiment which Özal skillfully tapped into, to put his ideas to work.

When the AK Party rose to power, the New Right had already taken hold in the world. The political parties that were best suited to bring about the same kind of change in Turkey, however, had been weakened by the country's unique political circumstances. The only remaining candidate was the AK Party, a conservative movement.

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By making references to reformism, the AK Party successfully portrayed itself as a breakaway movement from its conservative political tradition, used its potential and leapfrogged in front of its politically bankrupt competitors. In this regard, the AK Party was born as an ultimately idiosyncratic political movement. Although it bore some resemblance to other political parties, including the Democratic Party and the Motherland Party, the AK Party differed from them in many ways because it was born under different circumstances.

Interestingly, the AK Party leadership immediately realized that the movement was born under different conditions and attempted to set a unique course for themselves. This new course was proof that the AK Party distinguished itself from the National Outlook (*Milli Görüş*) movement. This development, in turn, required the AK Party to assume the following political responsibility: to transform the base along with itself and bring about a complete *political mutation* in order to establish itself firmly at the center and consolidate its new position.

In retrospect, the AK Party appears to have been successful. At the same time, the movement persuaded the various social groups, whose support it would need to consolidate its power in the long run, that it was a 'pragmatic' party –even if this meant facing criticism from certain 'Islamic' groups over its political mutation. In other words, the AK Party found ways to undergo a radical mutation and to strengthen its legitimacy in the eyes of various groups that viewed the AK Party as a pragmatic movement. It assumed the same position when it came to transforming the worldview of its core base.

AK Party's Success in the Economic Sphere

The AK Party's success in the *economic sphere* was fueled by its commitment to addressing the long-standing grievances of the masses –partly to appease its core audience and, to another extent, reach out to social groups on whose support it counted. To borrow from economist Amartya Sen, it is important to acknowledge that the AK Party government's policies were geared towards showing and/or facilitating the capacity of the population for action.[10] In this regard, the AK Party convinced the socially alienated masses, including people in southeastern Turkey, that inequality was about the unfair distribution of rights. After all, it is the fair distribution of rights that makes people fulfill their potentials, rather than income inequality.

Representatives of the AK Party and MHP formed the People's Alliance before the June 24 elections.

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It is possible to describe similar situations in other countries as applications of 'citizenship technologies.'[11] The term refers to the promotion of economic and social integration through emphasis on putting social capital (i.e. the outcome of shared values among people outside of material assets, such as families, education, social life, work and the ability to mobilize, access to and use of communication networks, etc.), to work actively and widely. In this sense, the AK Party's policy decisions weren't entirely unique but part of a broader process of integration into the global economic order.

As a matter of fact, the World Bank has long stressed the need for strengthening and improving social capital in policy recommendations to governments around the world. The World Bank projects view social capital as a strategic tool for poverty reduction and, at the same time, emphasize the role of civil society in facilitating the market economy.[12]

In Turkey, the World Bank's recommendations entered the radar of successive governments as a way to overcome the February 2001 economic crisis. This process, which began at the time, compelled the country to take certain economic measures in order to integrate into global markets and, at the same time, required them to eliminate the political limitations which would otherwise have stopped governments from taking those economic measures, through the promotion of democracy. The AK Party came to power after this process started and took into consideration a series of economic,[13] social,[14] and political[15] recommendations to chart its course for the past fifteen years. Elsewhere,

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I posited that it would not be wrong to describe the spectrum of policies implemented by the AK Party as 'social liberalism.'[16] Social liberalism is a political tool to promote social capital and integrate disadvantaged groups (by creating incentives, making social security more widely available and, consequently, empowering social groups) into the economy. It aims to strengthen the network of global integration and the legitimacy of markets by including the outsiders.

Building on its ideological tradition, the AK Party successfully used network-like mechanisms (recall the role of municipalities and local communities here) and was able to get the desired results. The movement's performance in the economic sphere sheds light on the political sphere, where the AK Party facilitated Turkey's transition to a new system of government –the 'presidency' system of government.

It is important to note that the AK Party's vision for democracy, first and foremost, concentrates on *political unity*. Provided that democracy is a type of *political solidarity*, this point is crucial to understand the position of the AK Party and to accurately establish the direction of potential political developments in this area.

In Lieu of Conclusion

At the heart of democracy lies the homogeneity of a certain *demos*, or population, and unity, which is a concrete manifestation of said homogeneity. After all, citizens become eligible to be treated as equals by joining a *shared* essence. It is necessary to keep in mind, however, that the element that generates democracy (i.e. the shared essence) has the potential to destroy it. To identify a singular truth in the form of ethnicity, race, culture, ideology or doctrine as the shared essence of *demos* refers not to democracy but to the state as a form of communal living. By contrast, *political unity* puts the state first. This is what we cannot afford to misconceive: as a form of communal living, the state does not contain political unity. Quite the contrary, it is a historical stop for political unity. In the sense that Carl Schmitt uses the word, the perception of political unity[17] as a form of unity equipped with the decision making powers to overcome internal contradictions must not result in its identification with the state.

Under the circumstances, it is necessary to concede that the AK Party's notion of democracy based on societal 'openings' is more welcoming than contemporary approaches. Here's why: the current idea of democracy, which opposes the AK Party's approach, prioritizes the state over political unity. This perspective represents the point of reference for the AK Party's opponents, who identify themselves as "opponents of the state." In the final analysis, the opposition reduces the *demos*

to a single dimension and identifies that single dimension as the *essence* that keeps the *demos* together. In this regard, the HDP's primary concern, for example, is to create a new *demos* on the basis of Kurdish ethnic identity. The MHP strives for a formula that assumes Turkish ethnic identity as the essence of the demos. The CHP, in turn, represents a tradition that originally assigned an ethnic essence to the demos, added other elements into that essence as required by later developments –which manifested itself in the form of the Six Arrows– and, in the end, assumes the demos to be one and the same with the state.

The following point, however, tends to be ignored: homogeneity, which forms the basis of the demos, can manifest itself in many different ways. Those manifestations can be expressed within a more inclusive framework –which is political unity. This is exactly where the AK Party differs from its opponents: it attempts to replace the demos with the notion of *civilization*. In other words, it seeks to create the hope that the single-dimensional essentialism of the demos, which limits diversity, can be overcome with references to *civilization*, and thereby creates a space for the non-state. In this regard, *civilization* is far more welcoming than the demos and, by extension, more capable of facilitating the peaceful coexistence of different groups and ideas. After all, *civilization* refers to the sum of social practices, values and meanings (from technology to the economy, from science to the arts, and from faith to symbolic rituals), which various human com-

munities created in a certain geographical area over time by linking together material and spiritual domains.

In this sense, unlike the demos, the political unity that the AK Party seeks to promote does not view ethnic, cultural, religious or linguistic homogeneity as a precondition. In accomplishing this task, the desperately needed political motivator is *asabiyyah*. I define this term, which was coined by İbn Khaldun,[18] as the capacity for collective action, which includes a collective sense of belonging and group solidarity.

As I discussed above with reference to the economist Amartya Sen, the ability of the AK Party's policies to develop the population's capacity for action simultaneously promotes efforts to revive the *asabiyyah* in popular culture and thereby promote a sense of belonging in a civilization. In other words, *asabiyyah* refers to the encouragement of communities, which are subjects of a civilization, to create their own *nomos*, or legal constitution, within political unity. At the same time, this represents the historical moment, in which politics becomes antagonistic at home and abroad.

The AK Party's development and final destination refers to hegemonic leadership that embodies such a moment. Without straying away from semantics, one can recall once again that hegemony entails a part (a party) of the whole (the people) coming to the forefront and assuming a leadership role. From this perspective, hegemony includes a potentially constitut-

ing power. Nonetheless, it is necessary to consider the possibility of the hegemony's constitution as contingent, since one party assuming a leadership position is not a foregone conclusion. This, in turn, entails a dilemma, which is the product of the AK Party's delusion of being irreplaceable (c.f. vanity, against which Erdoğan warned after the June 24 elections) and, as a result of said delusion, the failure of critics, who charge the movement with 'civilian guardianship,' to appreciate the new dimension that it seeks to add to the notion of democracy.

History functions through simultaneous, multiple processes. Where history will place the AK Party, how the movement will perform depending on that position and what political legacy it will leave to the future will all depend on how the above-mentioned dilemma will be interpreted. ■

Endnotes

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