Turkey's Radical Right and the Kurdish Issue: The MHP's Reaction to the "Democratic Opening"

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ABSTRACT

Turkey's current government's 'democratic opening' project has led to a series of political discussions regarding the cause and resolve of the Kurdish issue. One major consequence of this debate has been the polarization of opinion between conservatives, represented by the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) and nationalists, represented by the Nationalist Action Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP). This study elaborates on the major reasons for MHP's opposition to AKP on the 'democratic opening.' In doing so, the study examines the historical, ideological distinctions between the two parties and their perception of ethnic and linguistic differences in Turkish society. AKP comes from a political tradition that has been relatively more accommodating towards such differences. On the contrary, MHP has roots in an ethno-nationalist and mono-culturalist ideology, which can be observed in its denial of the identity component of the Kurdish issue.

Ohne of the most controversial policies of the current government in Turkey has been the 'democratic opening' project. This novel project has also been referred to as the 'Kurdish opening' or the 'national unity project.' The main purpose of this project was to normalize the long-standing Kurdish issue, resolve it through civilian means, and provide a rapprochement between the Turkish state and the non-conformist Kurdish population in Turkey. Even though the opening theoretically applies to other groups, such as the non-Muslims and Romanis, it was obvious from the beginning that the major target group was the Kurds. Above all, the opening aimed to disarm and disband the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK),[1] which the Turkish state has perceived as a terrorist organization.

In fact, the content of the democratic opening came well after the government started to use this term in the summer of 2009. The Jus-

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tice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) government was initially criticized for being ambiguous about what particular domains of social and political life the opening would apply to. Prominent members of the government including Prime Minister Erdoğan recently made clarifications about the opening. One of the most important goals of the opening is to make some important changes in the current laws in Turkey. Such changes include fighting against torture and human rights violations, establishing a commission on discrimination cases, permitting the use of formerly Kurdish titles for districts and sub-districts,[2] translating and distributing the Quran in Kurdish, eliminating legal barriers for speaking Kurdish during prison visits, and establishing Kurdish language and literature departments at various universities.

One of the implications of the opening relates to the 'return-home' policy for a small group of PKK members residing in the Kandil and Mahmur mountains of Northern Iraq. While the government initiated this gesture as part of the democratic opening, it did not recognize the PKK as a legitimate actor in its official discourse. A group of 34 PKK members entered Turkey via the Habur Gate in the southeast of Turkey and they were welcomed by sympathizer groups with cheers. They came with a list of conditions for returning home and living together, which were unacceptable to many people.[3] This incident triggered Turkish nationalist sentiments in society. Major opposition parties blamed the AKP charging that the party cooperated with terrorists and failed to defend the national interests.

Despite all these accusations, AKP seemed dedicated to pursuing the democratic opening. Several members, including Erdoğan, mentioned the government's willingness on the subject. In one of his speeches in the eastern city of Malatya, Erdoğan stated that the government would clarify the content and implications of the democratic opening for the general public through conferences, symposiums, and panels. Erdoğan added, "We are ready to sacrifice all the chairs, we are ready to lay down all our titles and strip off all the ranks so that not even another single drop of soldier blood is shed."[4] Most recently, AKP published and publicized a 134-page report entitled 'The Democratic Opening Project with Questions and Answers: The National Brotherhood Project.'

One of the potential positive consequences of the democratic opening is the acceptance of identity politics by the Turkish state, which can contribute to the

democratization process in the country. In fact, the concept of identity politics has been an integral component of progressive left-wing politics in consolidated democracies since the late 1960s. The recognition of identity politics is generally the indicator of a growing social awareness of cultural differences within society. Identity politics is associated with progressive political movements

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of the turbulent 1960s. These movements include civil rights acts of a variety of disadvantaged groups in society such as African-Americans, women, indigenous peoples, foreigners, immigrants, gays, and the handicapped. Recognition of differences in society contributes to democratization, as new identities contribute to new legal arrangements to expand social equality and build on individual freedoms. Nevertheless, identity politics has been an alien notion to the Turkish society. It has been regarded as a 'dirty word' as many people have associated identity politics with the 'enemies' of Turkey and its territorial integrity. Even launching the democratic opening was a risky business for AKP as the major opposition parties started to level a variety of serious accusations against the government including treason and total destruction of the country.

Currently, there are three major opposition parties in the unicameral Turkish Grand National Assembly (*Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi*, TBMM). The major opposition group is the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), which is also a party-member of the Socialist International. The second largest opposition party is the radical right-wing Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP). The third is the left-leaning, pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, BDP), which is the political successor of the recently banned Democratic Society Party (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*, DTP). At first, CHP and MHP blamed AKP for cooperating with DTP (BDP's former title) and there was a short period of silence between DTP and AKP. Recently, all three opposition parties have directed their rhetoric against the AKP. Of course, parties use different justifications for their criticisms as they differ in ideology.

This study intends to contribute to our understanding of the AKP-MHP opposition on the Kurdish issue in general, and the democratic opening in particular. For this purpose, it elaborates on MHP's nationalist reaction to the conservative AKP's democratic opening project and discusses the reasons why the two right-winger parties have diverged in opinion on this issue. The emphasis is placed on

MHP and the reasons why MHP radically dissented from AKP on the opening are elaborated. The AKP-MHP difference is an interesting subject matter in this context as the opening developed into a manifestation of deeper historical and ideological differences between conservatives and nationalists in Turkey with respect to the long-standing Kurdish issue.

In explaining this controversy, the rest of this study goes as follows: Firstly, an overview of Turkey's Kurdish question is presented in order to shed light on the very nature of the issue. Secondly, MHP's political heritage in the Turkish context is presented along with a discussion of its radical right-wing identity. The first two steps help understand MHP's perception of the Kurdish issue even before its reaction to the opening. Finally, MHP's political reaction to AKP's opening is elaborated upon based on the accounts of its meeting in Tandoğan, Ankara as well as the speeches of MHP's prominent members including Devlet Bahçeli, its current leader.

In fact, both AKP and MHP reflect the traditional, moral, and nationalist values in the Turkish social context. Even though AKP is relatively a recent party, it represents a synthesis of right-wing tendencies in Turkish politics including social conservatives, fiscal conservatives, pro-Islamists, and nationalists. MHP is not an antidote of AKP because both are right-wingers. They overlap, to a large extent, on the issues that pertain to social conservatism and Turkish nationalism. Both parties emphasize family values, traditional morality and the Turkish national identity. Due to such similarities, some traditionally right-wing voters occasionally switch between the two parties. A recent survey demonstrated that even though Turkish voters are generally loyal to the parties they vote for, some voters do mention their second party preferences when they are asked about it. According to this study, AKP-voters' second party preference is MHP while MHP-voters' second preference is AKP or DP (Democrat Party).[5] The study found that AKP and MHP are the most frequently mentioned second party preferences in society. Therefore, it concludes that both parties appeal to a considerably large portion of the Turkish electorate.[6]

Turkey's Kurdish Question

In Philip Robin's words, the Kurdish question has been an existential issue for Turkey because it has presented a challenge to the identity, composition, and territorial integrity of the Turkish state.[7] The official discourse has historically avoided the ethnic component of the Kurdish issue as the state denied the existence of Kurds in Turkey. Therefore, the 'Kurdish-ness' of the Kurdish issue was largely

overlooked. Whenever the Turkish official state discourse mentioned the Kurdish issue, it was regarded as an issue of political reaction, banditry, regional resistance or simply backwardness[8] but not as an issue of political rights or equal citizenship.

The Republic of Turkey had to live with the Kurdish question since its foundation as a secular and unitary state in 1923. During the early Republican period, the Kemalist ideology aimed to create a modern Turkish nation-state based on a 'one country, one nation' principle. This was not a physiologically racist or an exclusionist definition of nation. The nationalism principle of Kemalism intended to create a nationhood of people who would be willing to live together within the territory defined by the National Pact (*Misak-ı Milli*).[9] Kemalism required no physical racial purity as a criterion of inclusion in the Turkish nation. Nevertheless, Kemalism aimed to create a modern Turkish language as a common denominator to unite people around the Turkish nation. Therefore, a series of top-to-bottom reforms were introduced to reconstruct the national language.[10] In this regard, it is fair to argue that Kemalist nationalism carried a mission of 'Turkification' for creating a modern Turkish nation state.

During the early Republican period, there were three major rebellions in the Kurdish-populated regions in the east and southeast of Turkey. The first took place in February 1925 under the leadership of the Sheikh Said of Piran to protest the abolition of the caliphate and secularization policies. The second one, the Mount Ararat uprisings, occurred in the north-east in 1930-31, and was led by İhsan Nuri and formerly Ottoman officers. The third took place in 1937 in the Dersim region (current province of Tunceli) against the strong centralization tendencies of Ankara, the capital of Turkey.[11] All of these uprisings were suppressed by the state authorities.

The most contemporary unrest started out during the turbulent and politically polarized period of the late 1970s when a group of left-leaning Kurdish nationalists united around Abdullah Öcalan (Apo), the leader of the PKK. In 1984, Öcalan launched a rebellion that would result in more than 30,000 deaths and destruction of 3000 villages. The 1980 coup had crushed all political activities in Turkey (particularly the left) and created an extremely non-politicized atmosphere. With the transition to civilian politics throughout the decade, the lift of political bans on politicians, and the mushrooming of civil society organizations, the public in Turkey became acquainted with various unorthodox ideas that could be discussed openly. One of those ideas was advocacy for the Kurdish identity.

From the 1990s onwards, left-wing and pro-Kurdish parties started to form in Turkey. The first party was the People's Labor Party (*Halkın Emek Partisi*, HEP), which was founded in June 1990 by a group of dissenters from the center-left Social Democratic Populist Party (*Sosyal Demokrat Halkçı Parti*, SHP). They were expelled from SHP for attending a conference in France about the Kurdish question.[12] HEP and SHP formed a pre-election coalition before the 1991 parliamentary elections and several HEP deputies were elected on SHP's ticket. Nevertheless, two HEP deputies caused an 'oath crisis' in the national assembly the same year when they switched from Turkish to Kurdish during the oath taking ceremony.[13] This act was heavily protested by the rest of the parliament members, and SHP had a difficult time as it was blamed for cooperating with the separatists.

Afterwards, HEP was closed down by the Constitutional Court on the count of "threatening the national unity and territorial integrity of Turkey." Several political parties established as successors to HEP were banned on similar justifications.[14] Even though pro-Kurdish parties have been quite controversial for the majority of the society, they have played a significant political role in explaining their political cause to the public. By the end of 1999, Öcalan was captured and put in jail in an isolated island, İmralı. Pro-Kurdish parties always demonstrated their sympathy for Öcalan and most of them rejected to refer to him as the 'head of terrorists.'

Turkey started to discuss its Kurdish problem in real terms during the 1990s and 2000s as the existing political leaders, including conservatives, started to acknowledge the Kurdish reality in Turkey.[15] In addition, Turkey's willingness to become a full member of the European Union played a significant role in the social perception of the Kurdish issue as the EU demanded from Turkey a series of political reforms during the initial years of the AKP government. Pursuing Kurdish identity politics was a taboo for political parties in Turkey during the 1970s and 1980s. Since the early 1990s, however, pro-Kurdish left-wing parties have created their own turbulent political history with a small yet considerable vote share. After the latest 2007 parliamentary elections, Turkish nationalists and pro-Kurdish left-wingers had to adapt themselves to peaceful coexistence with one another in the national legislature.

Nationalist Action Party and the Turkish Ultranationalists

The major political group that represented Turkish ultranationalism is the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP), whose history dates back to the mid-1960s. MHP was formed as the transformation of an already existing party. Its predecessor was the Republican Peasants' Nation Party (*Cumhuriyetçi*

Köylü Millet Partisi, CKMP), which was founded in 1948. CKMP's program incorporated a modernist, Kemalist, and corporatist agenda. In 1965, a new political group under the leadership of the former colonel Alparslan Türkeş took control of the CKMP and Türkeş was elected the party chairperson. Türkeş's leadership resulted in a total ideological transformation as well as the departure of some former CKMP members. Yet, CKMP with Türkeş did not start out as an electoral winner. In the 1965 elections, CKMP received only 2.2 percent of the national vote.

In 1967, CKMP adopted Türkeş's 'Nine Lights Doctrine' (*Dokuz Işık Doktrini*), which formed the ideological basis of the Turkish radical right. This doctrine embraced an ultranationalist ideology that relied on a combination of pan-Turkist, monoculturalist, authoritarian, anti-communist, and moralist elements. The name of the party was changed from CKMP to MHP at the 1969 Adana Convention. The internal structure of MHP revealed a hierarchical, charismatic leader-driven party profile as party activists and supporters began to refer to Türkeş as 'Başbuğ' (the great leader). MHP soon adopted the 'Turkish-Islam synthesis' (*Türk-İslam Sentezi*) as a fundamental component of its ideology. MHP was since then not only a Turkist party but also a Muslim party. Some lower-rank Turkists were against the Islamization of the party and they dissented, but they were expelled from the party.[16]

MHP competed in the radical right-wing political space with the pro-Islamists, represented by the National Salvation Party (*Milli Selamet Partisi*, MSP). During the entire 1970s, pro-Islamists and ultranationalists were the representatives of two different branches of right-wing radicalism: religious conservatism and Turkish nationalism, respectively. The former's priority was religious issues, morality issues, and issues that pertain to the rights and liberties of pious people or Muslims. For this reason, the pro-Islamist political tradition has been under heavy pressure by the secular state establishment. The common accusation against them was the argument that they aimed to undermine secularism (laicism), as it was understood in Turkey to mean separation of politics and religion. Instead of a secular system, the argument continued, they aspired for an Islamic state based on the Sunni religious beliefs and dogmas. The Constitutional Court of Turkey has frequently shut down parties of this political tradition on this account, namely undermining secularism.

For ultranationalists, the national identity (being a Turk) came before the religious identity (being a Muslim) even though the latter was still heavily emphasized in written and oral propaganda. For the pro-Islamists, however, the situation was the opposite. The ultranationalist tradition was not banned as frequently as

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the pro-Islamist tradition in recent history. While the pro-Islamist tradition was shut down by the Constitutional Court a total of four times, MHP was banned only once and that was when all the political parties were banned from politics in 1981, during the military junta regime of the 1980 coup period (1980-83).

As opposed to pro-Islamists, MHP was more conformist regarding the close relations between Turkey and the US during the Cold War, as the two countries were allies against communism. MHP's priority was not the pious people but the Turkish nation and state. The 1980 coup military regime sent the ultranationalists to the courts on the accounts what sounded like accusations of fascism. Actually, the idealist movement was tried for attempting to seize control of the state through anti-democratic means and establishing a dictatorship in the country. MHP's primary cause until the 1980 coup was protecting the Turkish state from a communist takeover by either the Soviet Union or 'collaborators' inside. During the 1980s, communism was still perceived as a real threat but MHP quit its active fight against communism on the streets. Since the mid-1980s, it has prioritized national identity, unity, and territorial integrity against territorial separation.

During the 1970s, MHP behaved like a single-issue party as it fought against the 'communist threat' in Turkey.[17] Turkish society was extremely polarized and MHP represented one side of this ideological polarization. The opposite side was the more heterogeneous and more fragmented collection of radical left-wing groups, including labor unions, youth organizations, and student groups. The ultranationalist movement defined itself as the 'Idealist Movement' (*Ülkücü Hareket*). Leftist groups blamed the idealists for acting like militants and referred to them as 'fascists' though MHP denied such criticisms. MHP has never embraced fascism or racism openly in its official language. It has never openly denounced the idea of democracy.

The idealists' youth organization has been known as the 'Hearths of Ideals' (*Ülkü Ocakları*). The hearths and MHP were not officially connected, but it was commonly known to everyone that they thought and acted together. One of the most controversial issues about the idealists during the 1970s was their summer training camps where young members received the designation of 'commando.' Under criticisms, MHP defended its youth strategy as a service to the country because they were providing a patriotic education to all youths attending their camps.[18]

Photo: AA, Bülent Uzun

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The 1980 coup crushed all the existing parties in Turkey, including the MHP. The military regime decided to ban all the existing political parties and placed a political ban on all their existing cadres. These cadres founded the Nationalist Work Party (*Milliyetçi Çalışma Partisi*, MÇP) as a successor to MHP. MÇP did not perform well in the parliamentary elections of 1987 with only 2.9 percent of the national vote and no parliamentary seats, as they did not meet the national electoral threshold.[19] The 1987 referendum resulted in the lifting of the existing ban on former politicians and political leaders. The unquestioned leader of the movement, Türkeş, was elected to MÇP's chairmanship the same year. MÇP recovered the old MHP title in 1993. After Türkeş's death in 1997, MHP elected the former party secretary Devlet Bahçeli to the chairmanship position. Bahçeli is MHP's primary voice today.

Two important developments led to a moderation of MHP's political stance in recent times: the 1980 coup and the election of Devlet Bahçeli as party chairperson in 1997. The military intervention of 1980 led to a disappointment for the idealists as the military regime perceived them as a dangerous group along with the left-wing revolutionaries. Some idealists perceived the military regime's decision to punish them as a 'betrayal' by the state. The court trials, long prison

sentences, and human rights violations towards the incarcerated idealists led the movement to reconsider its close connections with the state establishment.[20] Another important factor for the general moderation of the party rhetoric is Bahçeli's personality as the leader of the idealist movement. Bahçeli is a more moderate leader than Türkeş. Bahçeli has behaved quite carefully in preserving MHP as a respected, mainstream party by curbing its former radicalism.[21] He reduced the number of idealist hearths around the country. He was quite cautious before selecting representative candidates for parliamentary seats before the 1999, 2002, and 2007 elections. His choices for the seats were among devoted MHP members with university degrees. Some argued that MHP successfully located itself in between secularists and Islamists by mixing Kemalist and conservative values by the late 1990s.[22]

In addition, there are some signs of MHP's changing stance towards the Kurds as Bahçeli recognized the Kurdish reality in Turkey, unlike Türkeş who was reactive to the Kurdish reality. Türkeş participated in a televised discussion program with Orhan Doğan, a former DEP deputy. As a response to Doğan's statement, "Turkey was a mosaic," Türkeş famously replied "Not mosaic, Turkey is marble." This statement simply meant the defense of cultural homogeneity (marble) as opposed to cultural heterogeneity (mosaic). Bahçeli's discourse has been relatively more accommodating to cultural plurality. For instance, in a press conference in 2005, Bahçeli said "Turkish citizenship or identity does not require a denial of the citizens' ethnic origins, religions, and languages… Turkey is a big flower garden composed of different colors, tones, and scents."[23] Bahçeli shook hands with the DTP deputies in the opening of the national legislature after the 2007 parliamentary elections. This was perceived as a nice gesture from Bahçeli to DTP. Former mottos like 'love it or leave it' (*ya sev ya terket*) were dropped from MHP's rhetoric.

Furthermore, the contextual and global changes in the post-Cold War period and political developments in Turkey led to changes in MHP's world vision. After the demise of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall, communism ceased to be a major threat for MHP. With MHP's moderation under Bahçeli's leadership, the party's vote share grew at an extraordinary rate. A genuine electoral victory came when MHP ended up being the second largest party in the country with 18 percent of the national vote and almost a quarter of the legislative seats in the 1999 parliamentary elections. This electoral success gave MHP a coalition partnership in a three-party coalition government with the center-left Democratic Left Party (*Demokratik Sol Parti*, DSP) and the center-right Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*, ANAP).

This coalition was not very successful in dealing with the macroeconomic management of the country and was short-lived. An economic collapse led to the shrinking of all coalition partners in electoral terms, including MHP. In the 2002 elections, AKP achieved a landslide victory and established a single-party government on promises of political and economic stability, while MHP's vote share fell below the national threshold of ten percent. Bahçeli announced that he would leave the chairmanship position, but the party members insisted on continuation of his leadership. In the 2007 elections, MHP received 14.3 percent of the national vote, regaining a sizable representation in the parliament. MHP is currently the third largest party with 69 out of 542 seats in the national legislature. As an opposition party, MHP criticized not only AKP but CHP and BDP/DTP as well. However, the highly influential agenda of the democratic opening recently intensified MHP's angry tone towards AKP. MHP has been developing a denouncing language against AKP since the democratic opening entered Turkey's political agenda.

AKP and MHP still represent two distinct right-wing political traditions. AKP comes partly from pro-Islamist politics. Historically, pro-Islamists and even some moderate conservatives have been skeptical towards the 'one country, one nation' principle of the early Republican period as they have often glorified the 'Ottoman past' and its multicultural social structure. In contrast, the ultranationalists have made 'Turkish-ness' their primary identity even before their Muslim identity. They have, therefore, tended to be more Turkist and monoculturalist than the pro-Islamists. This is largely because of MHP's long-standing ethno-nationalism, which corresponds to an essentialist understanding of who belongs to the 'nation' and who does not. In contrast to the strongly secular CHP, MHP's ideology has combined Turkish nationalism with orthodox Islam. As their popular slogan goes, "Turkishness is our body, Islam is our soul."[24]

The axiomatic difference between the religious (pro-Islamist) and the nationalist right-wing radicalism in Turkey takes its roots from the pro-Islamists' concept of 'ümmet' (umma) versus the nationalists' 'millet' (nation) as the ideal society. The early pro-Islamists' ideal was bringing back the Golden Age of the Prophet Mohammed (*Asr-ı Saadet*), which politically means an Islamic order. Therefore, the pro-Islamists of Turkey have been relatively more critical of the early Republican type of a secular, civic Turkish nationality as a homogeneous identity or the only identity in Turkey. In contrast, ultranationalists believed that the 'Turkish nation' is the end to be preserved at all costs. During the late 1970s and 1980s, ultranationalists perceived religion and religiosity in their fight against the external and internal threats (the left) as the glue keeping the society united around a common ideal. As such, religiosity was of secondary importance to them and was

only an instrument, not an end. The primary concern of the ultranationalists was the *status quo* (the Republic of Turkey) not *status quo ante* (i.e., Golden Age of Muhammed, Ottoman Empire).[25]

MHP's Reaction to AKP's Democratic Opening

The difference between AKP and MHP on the Kurdish problem derives from their divergent assumptions about the very definition of the problem and the issue of citizenship in Turkey. While MHP recognizes the Kurdish reality, it does not consider the Kurdish issue as an identity issue or an issue of equality. There is no place for 'identity politics' in MHP's political language other than the 'Turkish identity.'[26] Accordingly, MHP does not accept the idea that the Turkish state may have committed wrongdoings in the past in dealing with its people of Kurdish origin. Thus, Kurds of Turkey have no legitimate cause for demanding rights, as they have never been discriminated against in the first place. For MHP, the Kurdish issue is an issue of security, law and order, and terrorism.

From the onset of the democratic opening, MHP has seen its architect, AKP, in total black-and-white terms. No MHP members have offered a comprehensive alternative plan to the democratic opening with a full, detailed content. MHP has, thus, been both anti-AKP and anti-opening so far. In fact, MHP declared AKP to be dangerous and accused it of treason and weakness. These severe accusations were supported by the charge that the AKP is heavily dependent on and influenced by Turkey's enemies. These 'evil' powers attempt to manipulate the Turkish government and shape the society according to their own interests. These powers are primarily the United States, the European Union, Armenia, and the PKK. Prominent deputies and members of MHP argued that the genuine reason behind the democratic opening is the influence of these evil forces. The AKP is accused of behaving submissively towards them and failing to defend the national interests of the country.

An important issue with respect to the democratic opening was the start of the TBMM's floor for discussions on November 10, 2009. This is the date on which the Turkish state officially commemorates Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey.[27] Both MHP and CHP condemned the government as they believed that this timing was not appropriate to start the talks and the government's decision was deliberate. Referring to the opening as a 'PKK opening,' Bahçeli argued that the timing of the opening was engrossing and conspicuous. The government was embracing murderers (terrorists) but was tyrannous towards war veterans. Blaming Erdoğan for responding to the demands by Öcalan and the Kandil Mountain, where PKK members reside, Bahçeli contended that this 'degradation' of government would

be noted by history. He mentioned that MHP was not looking for blood or revenge of any kind, but added, "…but if terrorists will be welcomed with cheers, where is the years-long fight against them to be placed?"[28]

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MHP organized a large protest at Tandoğan Square in Ankara on December 13, 2009. The title of the mass demonstration was 'The Meeting to Live and Make Live the One Thousand Years of Brotherhood' (*Bin Yıllık Kardeşliği Yaşa ve Yaşat Mitingi*). This title was ironic for MHP, as it mentions a 'brotherhood' between Turks and Kurds. Of course, this title reveals the way MHP sees the social and political processes related to the Kurdish issue. The term brotherhood is used in this context as a reference to the status quo with regard to citizenship in Turkey. For the MHP's leadership, AKP's democratic opening has not solved any problems, but instead, damaged the long-standing fusion within the society.

Bahçeli delivered a long speech at Tandoğan and the audience frequently applauded him. Bahçeli referred to the crowds as the evidence of a 'national reawakening of people.' He referred to the crowds as 'noble hearts' and 'almighty souls' who gathered to claim the flag and the martyrs, embrace the common future, unite around the national values, and protect the national unity, identity, and the state. Bahçeli's speech revealed a mentality inspired by conspiracy theories as he talked about the 'schemes being designed against Turkey.' Bahçeli referred to the seven years of the AKP-led government as 'lost years' and the darkest and the most dramatic years of chaos, crisis, and turbulence. He blamed AKP for Turkey's moral breakdown, social disintegration, cultural decay, and political corruption.

Even though MHP's meeting called for brotherhood, there was no intellectually profound discussion about what kind of a brotherhood MHP was actually referring to. In fact, this term was used mostly in ambiguous contexts when blaming the government for 'ruining the brotherhood' and making the argument that 'provocations against the one thousand years of brotherhood has been on the rise.' Other than a few examples like these, there was no debate about what is exactly meant by this 'brotherhood,' how exactly the government had ruined this brotherhood, and how the ruined brotherhood is to be repaired. What MHP means by brotherhood sounds like the unitary state and social fusion.

Bahçeli's discourse at Tandoğan was highly nationalistic and aggressive. He stated that the opening was an attempt to bargain with betrayal rather than a solu-

tion to any problem of Turkey. In his words, any compromise that the AKP has made and any missteps it has taken would turn into a new gain for the separatists. Bahçeli addressed his speech directly to Prime Minister Erdoğan. He referred to Erdoğan as the person responsible for lost lives, blood-shed, and the broken national honor. He denounced the cheerful welcome for the former PKK members returning home from the Mahmur Mountain. Bahçeli referred to the opening as a catastrophe as he openly said to Erdoğan, "If you are the prime minister, do what is necessary and abandon this catastrophe called the opening."[29]

MHP's reaction to the opening was not limited to the Tandoğan demonstration or Bahçeli's speeches. MHP's deputy parliamentary group chairperson Oktay Vural was another voice against the opening. He referred to the proponents of the opening as desperate defenders of the 'mandate.' In this context, Vural's use of the word 'mandate' can be ascribed to the same mentality that Bahçeli has towards the AKP being submissive to Turkey's enemies. In a television program he attended, Vural referred to the opening as a project to awaken a dormant dissension and ethnic provocation, and argued that the things done so far amount to treason. He said, "They [AKP] are bringing along more terrorism as they are saying more democracy".[30]

For MHP, the democratic opening simply means 'sleeping with the enemy' and is an indicator of AKP's weakness in dealing with the problem of terrorism in the country. In this regard, any verbal reference to ethnic groups or minorities in Turkey is a potential impetus for discrimination and exclusion of certain groups in society. In response to Erdoğan's statement that there are thirty-six different ethnic groups in Turkey, Vural asked, "If there are thirty-six ethnic groups, are you planning to make thirty-six different openings?"[31] Vural emphasized the shared values of the society, the common national identity, and the collective culture of Turkey. He referred to the opening as an approach that smells of 'racism.'

MHP's other prominent members reacted similarly. In a conference held in the province of Edirne, MHP's current deputy chairperson, Deniz Bölükbaşı, referred to the opening as a political project that came into existence with the insistence of the US. Bölükbaşı further stated that the project was being constructed as 'destruction blocks' to start out a process of dissociation and separation in the fundamentals of Turkey's national unity. He further warned the government that it is a risky action to test the patience and common sense of the nationalists. He added: "If Turkey's national existence is in danger, if our flag is brought down from the skies, the members of the nationalist movement are ready to give up their assets and lives."[32]

Not all voices from the nationalists have been similarly critical, however. Taha Akyol (a well-known columnist) draws attention to the opinions of Vedat Bilgin in his article entitled, "For whom are we discussing the opening?"[33] Bilgin is a sociologist, a long-time MHP member, and Bahçeli's current advisor. He ran as a deputy candidate on MHP's ticket in

> If the opening fails, however, MHP may benefit electorally from the traditional right-winger voters who are or will be disappointed with the democratic opening and its architect, AKP

Ankara's 2nd region in the 2007 elections but could not win a seat. In his article, Bilgin draws attention to two factors that generates ethnic nationalism: the psychology of feeling like the 'other' and the society's perception of some people as 'others.' Bilgin argues that allowing the use of local languages and helping people have the opportunity for self-development can contribute to the resolution of an ethnic conflict. By giving reference to Bilgin's political identity and his relatively liberal attitude on the issue of linguistic rights as a nationalist, Akyol advises MHP to moderate its discourse on the Kurdish issue.[34]

Vedat Bilgin is not the only dissenter within the ranks of MHP's nationalist intellectuals on the democratic opening issue. Turan Güven, a former MHP activist, also thinks differently from MHP. Güven was the leader of the idealist university student organizations and he served as MHP's youth branch leader during the early 1970s. Güven joined the Grand Unity Party (*Büyük Birlik Partisi*, BBP)[35] during the 1990s and later quit active politics. Güven criticizes both MHP and CHP for failing to provide an alternative opening program to the Kurdish issue. Güven argues that nationalism can make sense when it targets a foreign nation in certain cases, but it makes no sense to pursue nationalism against one's own citizens. He further argues that the opponents of the democratic opening want to maintain the Kurdish issue as it is rather than finding a solution for it.[36]

Bilgin and Güven's remarks are important in this context as both names represent MHP's nationalist intelligentsia. Their opinions contradict the political discourse of the current MHP representatives and reveal the potential for the nationalist political discourse to accommodate Kurdish identity in Turkey. Nevertheless, except for these rare examples, MHP members' reaction to the opening has generally been negative.

Conclusion

The democratic opening debate between AKP and MHP is important because it exposes the core ideological differences between the two major right-wing po-

litical party traditions in Turkey. This study focuses on the causes of this divergence with a reference to the political history and ideology of the conservative and nationalist movements in the country. In fact, AKP and MHP are not ideological adversaries as both share an ideology and discourse nourished by conservatism and nationalism in the Turkish political context. Both parties have a significantly high vote share potential among the traditionally right-wing electorates.

Nevertheless, there are significant disparities between the two party traditions that lead them to taking opposite sides on the democratic opening issue. AKP has a more recent history because it was founded as a new party in 2002, not a successor of a formerly existing party. In contrast, MHP's history goes back to the mid-1960s. AKP comprises a variety of right-wing groups and defines itself as 'conservative democrat' while MHP's primary premise is Turkish nationalism. Some of AKP's former members, including its leader Erdoğan, come from the former pro-Islamist movement, which has been more tolerant towards ethnic and linguistic differences in Turkey. On the contrary, MHP has been relatively cautious towards diversity issues due to its ethno-nationalist ideological roots. This primary difference forms the basis of the AKP-MHP controversy on the democratic opening. While AKP perceives the opening as a democratic progress and a means by which Turkey's Kurdish question can be resolved, MHP sees the opening as a sign of the AKP government's weakness in dealing with terrorism and establishing law and order in the country.

According to MHP's active politicians, the opening serves neither democratization nor reconciliation on the Kurdish issue in Turkey. On the contrary, they believe that the opening disturbs the existing fusion between ethnic communities. In fact, MHP acted together with AKP on several issues that appealed to the traditional right-wing voters, such as changing the dress code on university campuses to allow for wearing headscarf as well as the election of Abdullah Gül as the President. These strategies helped MHP get the appreciation of AKP's conservative voters to a large extent. If the opening becomes successful in resolving the Kurdish issue and if the public embraces its consequences, MHP may have a harder time in justifying its cause in opposing the opening. If the opening fails, however, MHP may benefit electorally from the traditional right-winger voters who are or will be disappointed with the democratic opening and its architect, AKP.

Endnotes

1. Cengiz Çandar, "The Kurdish Question: The Reasons and Fortunes of the 'Opening,'" *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (October-December, 2009), p. 13.

2. Several districts and subdistricts with Kurdish and other non-Turkish names were renamed in Turkish in Turkey's recent history.

3. Their demands included ending the isolation of Öcalan and the village guard system, which are regarded as excessive demands by not only the ultranationalists but also several mainstream politicians.

4. Journal of Turkish Weekly website (November 15, 2009) http://www.turkishweekly.net.

5. DP is a fringe center-right party, which claims the heritage of moderate conservatism in Turkey.

6. Bekir Ağırdır, "Sandığın İçindekini Ne Belirledi: 22 Temmuz 2007 Seçim Analizi" [*What Determined What's Inside the Ballot Box: July 22, 2007 Election Analysis*]. The entire study was published in the daily newspaper *Radikal*, July 25-28, 2007.

7. Philip Robins, "The Overlord State: Turkish Policy and the Kurdish Issue," *International Affairs*, Vol. 69, No. 4 (October, 1993), p. 675.

8. Mesut Yeğen, "The Kurdish Question in the Turkish State Discourse," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (October, 1999), p. 555.

9. The National Pact (*Misak-ı Milli*) was the manifesto of the Turkish War of Independence. Containing six articles, the Pact laid out, in the wake of the war, the territorial boundaries of Turkey to be secured. Current borders of Turkey correspond, to a large extent, to those outlined in the National Pact.

10. Such reforms include purification of Turkish from remnants of the Ottoman language and adoption of the Latin alphabet.

11. C. J. Edmonds, "Kurdish Nationalism," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1971), p. 91.

12. Aylin Güney, "The People's Democracy Party," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2002), p. 124.

13. These two HEP deputies were Leyla Zana and Hatip Dicle.

14. After HEP was closed down, the same political group founded the Democracy Party (*Demokrasi Partisi*, DEP) in 1993. After DEP was closed down in 1994, the People's Democracy Party (*Halkın Demokrasi Partisi*, HADEP) was founded as a successor. HADEP was later succeeded by the Democratic People's Party (*Demokratik Halk Partisi*, DEHAP) and the Democratic Society Party (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*, DTP). After DTP's recent closure, the same political group formed the Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, BDP).

15. One of the initial right-wing politicians to acknowledge the 'Kurdish reality' was the former Prime Minister and President, Süleyman Demirel. He openly used the phrase, "acknowledge the Kurdish reality" in 1992, when he was the Prime Minister. See Robins, "The Overlord State: Turkish Policy and the Kurdish Issue," p. 666.

16. Burak Arıkan, "Turkish Ultra-nationalists Under Review: A Study of the Nationalist Action Party," Vol. 8, No. 3 (July, 2002), p. 359.

17. The election propaganda by MHP during the 1970s reveals its anti-communist priority at the time. In some of the election banners, MHP blames all other parties for being too soft or accommodating towards Communism and presents itself as the only party to 'crush Communism.' In another, MHP presents itself as a party to 'crush the red bandit.' In this context, the 'red bandit' stands for left-wing revolutionaries.

18. Jacob Landau, "The Nationalist Action Party in Turkey," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (October, 1982), p. 594.

19. The 1980 military regime developed a ten percent national threshold for the parties running in elections to win representative seats. The purpose was to shrink the number of parliamentary

parties, prevent radical parties from winning seats in the national legislature, and prevent 'fragmentation' in the political scene. This national threshold is still in practice today.

20. Bora and Can argue that the September 12 Coup and the military rule in its aftermath was a serious 'shock' to the idealist movement. According to their argument, MHP's initial reaction to the 1980 coup was positive because the coup was staged in order to restore law and order in the country and targeted the Left. Yet, as the military junta showed signs of intolerance towards the idealists, some long-standing members of the nationalist movement started to express feelings of resentment, develop a critical language against the Coup and question their own principle of 'taking side with the state establishment.' Eventually, the nationalist discourse on the 1980 coup turned entirely negative to the extent of questioning the legitimacy of the leader of the Coup, Kenan Evren. See: Tanıl Bora and Kemal Can, *Devlet, Ocak, Dergah: 12 Eylül'den 1990'lara Ülkücü Hareket* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1994), pp. 101-146.

21. In their study about Devlet Bahçeli and far right politics in Turkey, Metin Heper and Başak İnce refer to Bahçeli as a person who avoids polarizing views and adopts a 'middle-of-the-road' approach to every issue. They also argue that Bahçeli sees MHP as a 'centrist' party. See Metin Heper and Başak İnce, "Devlet Bahçeli and 'Far Right' Politics in Turkey, 1999-2002," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 6 (November, 2006), pp. 874-876.

22. Sultan Tepe, "A Kemalist-Islamist Movement? The Nationalist Action Party," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Autumn, 2000), pp. 59-72.

23. Bahçeli used these words at MHP's press conference held on May 4, 2005. See: Taha Akyol, "MHP ve Kürtler," *Milliyet*, December 17, 2009.

24. Emrullah Uslu, "Ulusalcılık: The Neo-nationalist Resurgence in Turkey," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (March, 2008), p. 74.

25. *Status quo* means the existing state of affairs. *Status quo ante* means a formerly existing state of affairs.

26. Recent speeches of MHP's prominent representatives show that they ackowledge the existence of Kurdish people in Turkey. Nevertheless, this does not mean MHP's acceptance of the legitimacy of the cause of Kurdish identity politics. A close examination of MHP's election manifesto before the 2007 elections shows that MHP uses the word 'identity' (*kimlik*) only in nationalist arguments (i.e., 'national identity,' 'identity of Turkey'). MHP's manifesto mentions 'equality' (*eşitlik*) mostly in general contexts such as 'equality of opportunity' in education, but never with respect to equality of Kurdish people. See: *MHP Seçim Beyannamesi 2007* [MHP Election Manifesto 2007].

27. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the modern Turkish state, passed away on November 10, 1938. Since then, Turkey commemorates Atatürk on every November 10th.

28. *Milliyet*, November 3, 2009.

29. *NTVMSNBC*, December 13, 2009.

30. *Haber 7*, January 13, 2010.

31. *Hürriyet*, July 29, 2009.

32. *Milliyet*, January 16, 2010.

33. Türkiye Günlüğü website (January 15, 2010) http://www.turkiyegunlugu.net.

34. Taha Akyol, "MHP ve Kürtler," *Milliyet*, December 17, 2009.

35. BBP was formed in 1993 when a group of MHP members split from the party to form a new nationalist party. BBP has been more social conservative and electorally weaker than MHP.

36. *Zaman*, September 3, 2009.