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The rural roots of the rise of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey

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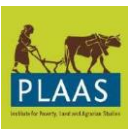


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The rural roots of the rise of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey

Burak Gürel, Bermal Küçük, Sercan Taş

1 Introduction

The uninterrupted rule of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP hereafter), since the general election on 3 November 2002, represents the peak of Turkish Islamism. Over the last fifteen years, the AKP has significantly transformed the Turkish economy, as well as its society and politics. In the economic realm, the AKP privatized the great majority of the state-owned enterprises, completing the job that the (relatively) secular parties of the center (right and left) undertook in the 1980s and 1990s. In other words, Turkish neoliberalism has been consolidated under AKP rule. On the other hand, by supporting the Islamist bourgeoisie much more so than the secular bourgeoisie through generous government contracts, state bank credits, and other favoritisms, the AKP has made significant progress (although not yet completed) in altering the balance of power in favor of the Turkish bourgeoisie's Islamist wing. The AKP's transformation of Turkish society and politics is related to, but runs much deeper than, its economic performance. The ruling party has implemented an ambitious project of undoing the relatively secular character of the state and society and reconstructing them on an Islamist platform. To this end, the government has considerably altered the curriculum and personnel of its educational institutions, from primary schools to universities; boosted the power of the Directorate of Religious Affairs; provided generous financial and political support to schools and hospitals run by Islamist foundations; and suppressed the secular and leftist opposition. Through its carrot and stick approach, and by making and unmaking various (and often contradictory) alliances over the years, the AKP has managed to control key state institutions, weaken the secular mainstream parties and organizations, and further marginalize the Kurdish movement and radical left. Since the AKP has not yet managed to maintain political stability, it is difficult to predict the future of Turkish Islamism. However, despite successive serious crises, the AKP's uninterrupted rule and mass support over the last sixteen years are undeniably remarkable successes of the Islamist project, which therefore should be seriously investigated.

Table 1. AKP's Vote Share (%), 2007-2015

	2007	2009	2011	2014	June 2015	November 2015
Rural	50.45	40.99	51.98	47.01	48.57	54.71
Urban	45.61	38.37	47.97	43.87	42.85	50.59
Metropolitan	44.06	40.22	44.59	39.32	39.02	42.91

Source: KONDA (2007-2015)

This paper analyzes the rural roots of the AKP's political power. Despite rapid urbanization, about a quarter of Turkey's population is still rural (World Bank 2018). The AKP's vote share has been consistently higher in the countryside than in the cities (Table 1). The approval of the constitutional amendment in the referendum on April 16, 2017 establishing a super presidential system without checks and balances signifies a recent milestone of Islamist power in Turkey. The amendment was passed by a slight majority (51.4%), but the share of the yes vote in the rural areas was much higher, estimated to be between 56% (Konda 2017) and 62% (Yetkin 2017).¹ The consistent support of the AKP since 2002 is a particularly interesting phenomenon because the great majority of the opposition parties – including the center-left Republican People's Party (CHP 2017; Yıldırım 2014), the pro-

¹ The degree of fairness of the April 16 referendum has been seriously debated, but it does not change the fact that support of the super presidential system was higher in rural regions than others.

Kurdish People's Democratic Party (*Cumhuriyet* 2015; *Demokrat Haber* 2017), numerous socialist parties and organizations (Halkevleri 2010; ÖDP 2017; TKP 2007), and critical agrarian studies scholars (Alçın 2017; Günaydın 2009, 2016; Oral 2013) – believe that the AKP has waged a war against agriculture and farmers, with the aim of completely de-agrarianizing the country and thereby making it entirely dependent on agricultural imports. A significant portion of news reports about agriculture and farmers published by the leftist and rightist (non-AKP) media outlets paints a similar picture.²

Though the AKP's agricultural policy is largely pro-capital and (by and large) neoliberal, its critics' singular emphasis on neoliberalism does not help much to explain the rural population's mass support of the AKP. This critique also risks portraying rural people as staunch religious conservatives and nationalists whose political behavior will not change, regardless of the changes in their living standards. We should avoid reducing the question of political hegemony to a simplistic and narrow question of cultural values. We need a comprehensive approach to understanding the causes of the AKP's rural support in order to inform a radical political project and organization that would represent a real political alternative.

This paper offers an alternative to existing explanations of the AKP's continuous power in the countryside by identifying its material basis. It points to factors such as rural people's perception of government policies, changes in living standards, and bargains with the government (through street protests and the ballot box), as well as the resulting concessions that the rural population has gained. As noted by the Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiatives' introductory/framing article, "contemporary populist politics are far from uniform and are often contradictory: for example, shoring up exclusionary and even violent political power, while selectively offering progressive policies, whether free tertiary education in the Philippines, land reform in South Africa or Zimbabwe, or targeted investment in rural communities in the US, Europe or India" (Scoones et al. 2017, 3). This is a critically important area to understand the popular base of the contemporary far-right politics, which is often overlooked in the literature. For example, in his very informative and insightful comparative-historical analysis of counterrevolutionary politics of Italy, Indonesia, Chile, Thailand and the Philippines, Walden Bello (2018) correctly identifies the middle classes' fear of lower-class mobilizations as a key factor behind the former's popular support for counterrevolutionary politics. However, he does not answer whether or not the counter-revolutionary movements could implement their own (and by definition, relatively limited) redistributive politics to gain the support of both lower and middle classes. In his detailed account, Bello examines economic populism only when dealing with Thaksin Shinawatra's Redshirts in Thailand in the 2000s, which was, according to Bello, not a counterrevolutionary actor but the target/victim of right-wing counterrevolution (Bello 2018, 43-46). In this paper, we argue that redistributive politics has played a significant role in the rise of far-right movements of the past and present.

In order to examine the relationship between redistributive politics and the rise of contemporary far-right politics, this paper investigates the role of "social neoliberalism" in the AKP's hegemonic rule in rural Turkey (Craig and Porter 2006, 12; Dorlach 2015; Öniş 2012, 137; Sandbrook 2014, 36-47). Social neoliberalism occupies an intermediate position on the spectrum of orthodox neoliberalism on the right and social democracy on the left. On the one hand, it differs from social democracy since its "social reforms are more uneven and remain coupled with more orthodox economic policies." On the other hand, by recognizing that "poverty and inequality require, at least in part, political solutions," social neoliberalism distinguishes itself from orthodox neoliberalism (Dorlach 2015, 524). We argue that social neoliberalism views the eradication of absolute poverty as a more important and urgent task than reducing income inequality. What motivates social neoliberalism's sensitivity to the question of poverty is its perception of the serious political risks associated with orthodox neoliberalism. Across the globe, the lower classes have rejected neoliberal policies through street protests, armed insurgencies, revolutions, and the ballot box. By providing a variety of material concessions to low-

² Among a large number of examples of negative media coverage of agrarian and rural change, see Büyüktaş 2016; Erboz 2017; Ertürk 2017.

income groups, a strategy often branded as “controlled populism” (Güven 2016, 1007), social neoliberalism offers at least a temporary political fix designed to contain the radicalization potential of peasants and workers and to win elections (Dorlach 2015, 521; Öniş 2012, 137).³

We argue that the AKP has competently followed a line of social neoliberal policy since 2002. On the one hand, it has followed the orthodox neoliberal prescription by implementing the privatization of state-owned enterprises and increasing the flexibility and precariousness of the labor market. On the other hand, it has shifted away from the orthodox neoliberal prescription through limited increases of agricultural support and significant expansion of the coverage and quantity of social assistance to the rural and urban poor. Despite the temporary economic slow-down of 2008-2009 under the impact of the world economic crisis, the Turkish economy has not faced catastrophic crisis. The average annual growth rate of GDP per capita was at 8% between 2002 and 2016 (World Bank 2018). This has created enough financial space for the AKP government to follow a social neoliberal line, which has been immensely helpful for the AKP’s political hegemony in rural Turkey.

This paper puts forward four main arguments. Firstly, we argue that since the previous DSP-MHP-ANAP coalition government (which ruled Turkey between May 1999 and November 2002) implemented the harshest neoliberal measures in the agricultural sector, small farmers do not associate neoliberal assault with the AKP administration. Secondly, the lower classes in rural areas have utilized both the ballot box and direct action in order to bargain with the AKP government. Thirdly, although the AKP government did not fundamentally depart from the neoliberal agricultural orientation (established by the previous government), it has adopted policies (in response to villagers’ use of street protest and the ballot box) that have eased the pressure on small farmers and proletarianized villagers –not entirely, but to a limited extent– through the return of agricultural subsidies and the significant expansion of social assistance to low-income groups. The AKP’s limited economic redistribution to the lower classes has made the neoliberal transformation more manageable and hegemonic in the countryside. Finally, like all historical experiences of political hegemony utilizing the carrot-and-stick approach, the AKP government has also used, in addition to material concessions, increasingly more coercive methods against radical farmer organizations, labor unions, the socialist left, and the Kurdish movement in order to isolate them from the masses, to prevent the emergence of an emancipatory (rural and urban) politics in Turkey, and complete the Islamist project. In this sense, AKP’s politics lies somewhere between the populism of Lula’s PT and Thaksin Shinawatra’s Redshirts (in the sense of appealing to the lower classes and those aspiring to the middle classes through low-interest loans, agricultural subsidies, and social assistance) and the openly counter-revolutionary Islamist politics exemplified by the militant anti-communism of the Muslim Brotherhood of the mid-1940s (Trichur 2008, 165) and Indonesian Islamists of the mid-1960s (Bello 2018, 29-30).

This paper consists of seven sections. The second section examines the historical reasons for the rural population’s relatively positive outlook toward the AKP government and remaining distance from the opposition parties. The third section responds to whether or not the AKP has completely deagrarianized Turkey and thereby impoverished its peasants. We argue that there is not much reason to expect villagers to blame the AKP government for their economic problems and thereafter support the opposition parties. We then substantiate this point through investigating the relationship between villagers and the AKP government. The fourth and fifth sections examine the AKP’s engagement with (respectively) the hazelnut and tea producers of the Eastern Black Sea region. The sixth section investigates the same question in the context of former tobacco farmers who have been proletarianized in the coalmines of the Soma basin of the interior Aegean region. The conclusion reiterates the main arguments of the paper and discusses their political implications for the future of emancipatory rural politics in Turkey.

³ On the question of the use of welfare provision as an apparatus of political containment and mobilization of the poor, also see Yörük 2012.

2 Islamists' rural policy record (1996-97) and neoliberal shock therapy in agriculture by parties other than the AKP (1999-2002)

The foundation of the AKP on August 14, 2001 was a result of the split within the National Vision Movement (*Milli Görüş Hareketi*), the brand name for the tradition of legal Islamist parties in modern Turkey (a tradition dating back to the early 1970s). The Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*, RP) represented this political line in the 1990s. Turkish Islamism achieved its first significant successes under the RP in the mid-1990s. The RP won the İstanbul and Ankara metropolitan municipality elections on March 27, 1994. It received 21.38% of the popular vote and won the general elections on December 24, 1995. A large portion of the founders of the AKP held important positions in the RP such as top party officials, ministers, deputies, and mayors. AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was the mayor of the İstanbul metropolitan municipality between 1994 and 1998.

Six months after the 1995 general election, the RP formed a coalition government with the center-right True Path Party (*Doğru Yol Partisi*, DYP). The RP-DYP coalition remained in power between June 1996 and June 1997. Government support to the agricultural sector was high during this period. Agricultural support (producer support as % of gross farm receipts) increased from 25.5% in 1996 to 31.6% in 1997. This was the highest level since 1986, with the exception of 1991 and 1992 – probably the most populist episode of the Turkish political economy in the entire post-1980 period (OECD 2018a). Hence, farmers did not have much reason to criticize the RP. On February 28, 1997, Turkish military command forced the RP-DYP government to accept a series of secular educational reforms aiming to prevent the further rise of Islamism. The military command threatened the government with a coup in case they refused to implement the reforms. This event is known as the “February 28 military memorandum.” Following the memorandum, the alliance of the military command, the secular bourgeoisie (including those controlling the majority of the mass media), and the leaders of major tradition unions put heavy pressure on the government, which brought it to collapse six months later, in June 1997. In other words, the Islamist RP was removed from office – not by popular demand, but by an army-led secular alliance– within just a year. Since the RP adhered to a populist agricultural policy, its forced removal from power did not alienate the small farmers from Islamism. On the contrary, both the rural and urban poor viewed the February 28 memorandum as a grave injustice to a government that they viewed as composed of devout people working for the people’s interests.⁴ Recep Tayyip Erdoğan –who was imprisoned for four months in 1998 after reading an Islamic poem during an RP demonstration, stripped from his post as the mayor of İstanbul, and banned from the parliamentary elections of 2002– became a popular Islamist figure during this period.

Later developments further consolidated the masses’ positive outlook on Islamists. The coalition government of the center-left Democratic Left Party (*Demokratik Sol Parti*, DSP), the ultranationalist Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP), and the center-right Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*, ANAP) remained in power between May 1999 and November 2002. Two of the three severest economic crises of the post-1980 period (1994, 1999, and 2001) occurred during the rule of the DSP-MHP-ANAP coalition. Compared to 1998, the GDP per capita contracted by one-quarter in 2002 (World Bank 2018). The crises of 1999 and 2001 forced the government to draw loans from the IMF, which were conditional on the implementation of a harsh neoliberal policy package, including drastic cuts to the agricultural support expenditures of the state. World Bank Vice President, Kemal Derviş, was launched into the seat of the Minister of Economic Affairs in March 2001, with a mission to guarantee strict implementation of the neoliberal reforms. Derviş quickly became the symbol of neoliberal orthodoxy and foreign influence in economic decision-making among the ordinary masses. All the neoliberal reforms implemented in 2001 and 2002 came to be known as the “Derviş reforms.” The share of farm subsidies in the GDP decreased from 3.2% in 1999 to 0.5% in 2002 (Yalçınkaya et al. 2006, 111-112). Agricultural support was cut by more than half within two years, from 36.43% in 1999, to 32.37% in 2000, and 16.86% in 2001. Although it increased to 26% in 2002 (OECD 2018a), it far from alleviated the huge damage done to small farmers. The Tobacco Law

⁴ For an early and perceptive analysis of the collapse of the parties of the center and the popularity of the RP government, see Çakır et al. 1996.

of 2001 eliminated state procurement of tobacco and resulted in the decline of tobacco-producing households from 583,400 in 2000 to 401,200 in 2002. The Sugar Law of 2001 implemented similar measures (Aydın 2010, 163-172). In 2002, the DSP-MHP-ANAP coalition eliminated previous forms of government support to agriculture and adopted a direct income support policy that provided cash assistance to farmers cultivating less than 50 hectares. Direct income support was provided to everyone documenting farmland ownership, regardless of whether they actually cultivated or not. In other words, it cut the historically close link between government support and agricultural production. Its primary aim was to contain the risks stemming from the neoliberal assault on small farmers (especially sugarcane and tobacco producers) and their resulting rapid proletarianization (Gürel 2014, 348-350).

The neoliberal assault against small farmers and workers made the DSP-MHP-ANAP government very unpopular. A large number of worker and farmer protests took place in 2001 and 2002 (Gürel 2014, 370-371). Although mainstream media did not side with the lower classes, media coverage of mass disappointment and protest events was much broader than today and negatively impacted public opinion of government policies. As a result, the coalition crumbled, and an early election was scheduled for November 2, 2002. The combined vote shares of the coalition parties declined from 53.4% in April 1999 to 14.7% in November 2002 (Turkish Statistical Institute 2012). One of the notable features of the election campaign in 2002 was the inclusion of Kemal Derviş in the list of deputy candidates of the center-left Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP). By taking this action, the CHP sent the message to the IMF, World Bank, and Western governments that if the CHP were to come to power, the "Derviş reforms" would continue. Putting the symbol of the Western control of the Turkish economy and neoliberal assault against small farmers and workers clearly revealed the CHP's neoliberal orientation once more. More importantly, it also demonstrated an utter incompetence with regard to understanding the mood of the lower classes at that time. Tayyip Erdoğan's AKP, established only a year earlier, received 34.3% of the popular vote, followed by the CHP, which received only 19.4% of the popular vote (Turkish Statistical Institute 2012). Due to the extremely undemocratic character of the Turkish electoral system, which only allows parties above the 10% threshold to be represented, only the AKP and CHP parties entered into parliament. The AKP controlled the parliamentary majority and formed a government on November 19, 2002.

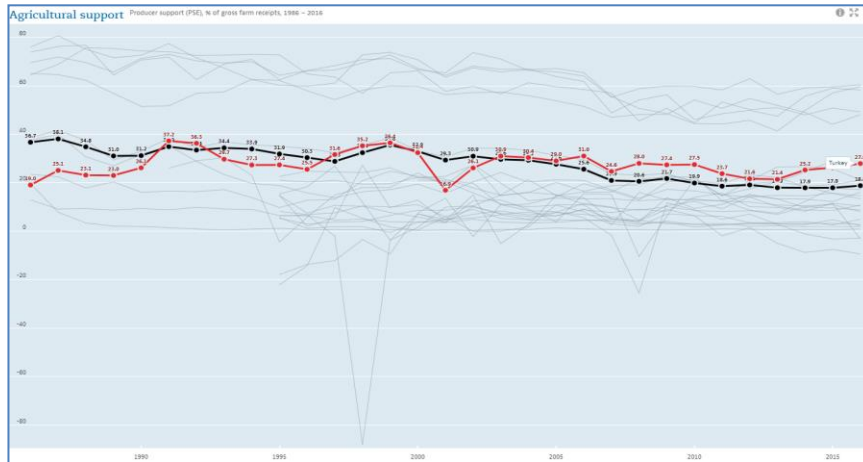
3 The AKP's politics of social neoliberalism in rural Turkey

The AKP government has not changed the neoliberal course of agricultural policy. The transition of Turkish agriculture from a smallholder-based to an agribusiness-based structure has continued unabated. Employment of wage labor and contract farming become increasingly prevalent relations of agricultural production. On the other hand, the government has introduced a series of policies that have helped to make the neoliberalization process relatively more acceptable among small farmers and proletarianizing villagers. Since the AKP inherited a very low support base (in terms of agricultural support, economic growth performance, and political popularity) from the DSP-MHP-ANAP coalition, these policies have helped the party to broaden its rural support base over the years.

As mentioned above, the DSP-MHP-ANAP coalition eliminated all forms of agricultural support other than direct income support, which severed the link between government support and agricultural production. In 2004, the AKP government revised the policy by bringing back producer support for crop production and animal husbandry (Güven 2009). The direct income support policy was terminated in 2010. Rather than simply reintroducing older forms of producer support, the AKP has since liberalized the support policy. Agricultural regions of Turkey were divided into basins, listing the (suggested) competitive advantage of each basin's products and distributing subsidies and other forms of financial support accordingly. An increasing portion of agricultural support has since been given to the production of certified organic products. At first, thirty different basins were listed. In 2016, all 941 districts of Turkey were classified as basins. The basin-based support policy favors the medium- and large-scale producers over smaller ones (Gürel 2014; Oral 2010; Yıldırım 2017).

Nevertheless, the total amount of agricultural support has increased. As Figure 1 demonstrates, the level of agricultural support in Turkey was significantly below the OECD average in 2001 and 2002, and has been consistently above it since 2003.⁵

Figure 1. Agricultural support (producer support % of gross farm receipts) in Turkey compared to the OECD average (2000-2016)



Source: OECD 2018a.

Note: Red and black lines represent Turkey and the OECD average, respectively.

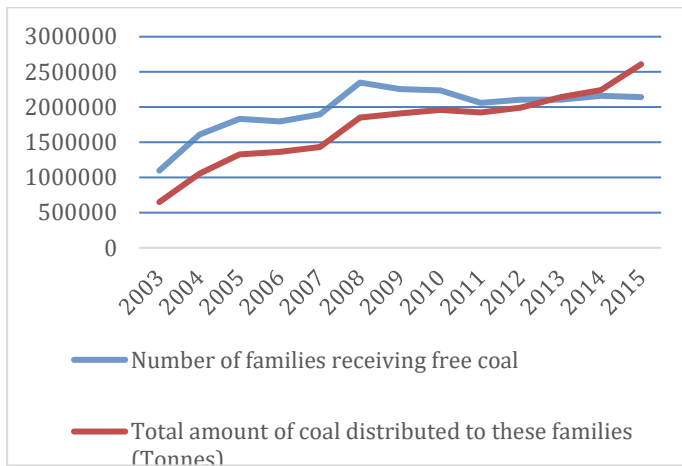
The AKP government has also implemented a series of social policy reforms to consolidate and expand its support base among the poor. Here, we define “poor” broadly, including the unemployed population, low-income farmers, and full-time and part-time workers in low-wage jobs. The AKP’s social policy programs include means-tested provisions of in-cash and in-kind assistance specifically targeting those below the official poverty rate. However, assistance is often given to those who do not fall below the poverty line. In fact, similar to other countries such as China (Chen et al. 2016), the case workers of the Ministry of Family and Social Security in Turkey maintain a significant degree of discretion of defining who is “poor” and therefore needs assistance. Hence, a large number of the low-income population receives assistance, despite being above the official poverty rate (Aytaç 2014, 1218-1219). As the AKP’s hold on power has consolidated, its control over caseworkers and means-testing procedures has tightened. Similar to the use of social assistance to contain political radicalization of the Blacks in the U.S. during the 1960s (Piven and Cloward 1979) and the Maoist insurgency in today’s rural India (Planning Commission 2008; Biswas 2010), the AKP government has used social assistance in order to contain the Kurdish movement (Yörük 2012). On several occasions, top public officials explicitly stated that they may consider freezing social assistance to families whose members participate in street demonstrations supporting the Kurdish movement (*Milliyet* 2008). The political use of social assistance has also influenced the AKP’s relationship with the Turkish poor. Here, social assistance has been used on some occasions to contain protests, but more often, it has been used to increase the AKP’s support base among the poor and therefore to win elections. As poverty rates are currently higher in rural Turkey, social policy measures have played an important role in maintaining continuous rural support for the AKP’s.

The share of social expenditure in Turkey’s GDP increased from 7.7% in 2000 to 10.3% in 2005 and 13.5% in 2014 (OECD 2018b). Between 2000 and 2010, the percentage of social assistance spending in total government spending increased by 266% (Üçkardeşler 2015). The share of the free health care

⁵ On February 20, 2018, the AKP government announced that starting this year it would cover half of the gasoline expenditure of farmers (*Sabah* 2018).

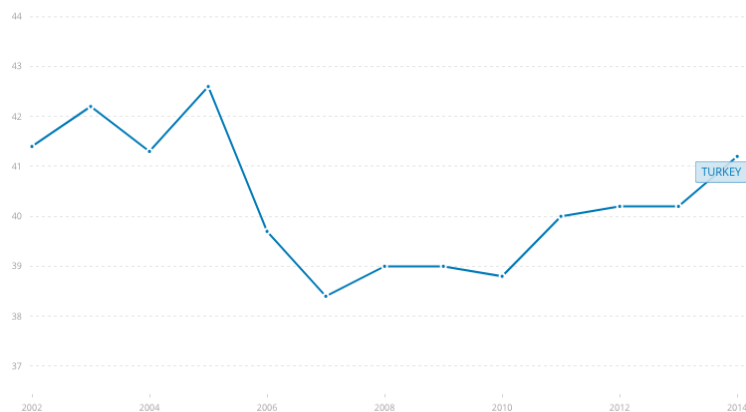
card (Green Card) holders among the total population increased from 4.2% in 2003 to 12.7% in 2009. A universal health care system was established in 2012 and incorporated all Green Card owners into the new system (Yörük 2012). Since 2003, the Ministry of Education has distributed course books free of charge to all primary and secondary school students (whose total number is about 15 million). The central government currently provides free midday-meals and school transportation to 600,000 students. In addition, the number of households receiving coal for heating has increased dramatically (Figure 2). The Turkish government’s regular in-kind and in-cash welfare provisions to a single poor family adds up to \$260, while the official minimum wage is around \$370. Also, if a poor family is caring for a disabled family member, it receives around \$350, which is almost equal to the minimum wage (Özgür 2014).

Figure 2. State provision of coal to households in Turkey (2003-2015)



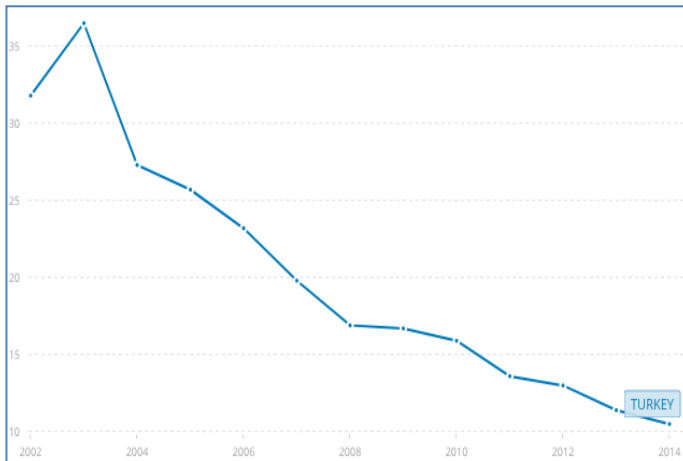
Source: T.C. Aile ve Sosyal Politikalar Bakanlığı (2014, 80; 2016, 51)

Figure 3. Gini index in Turkey, 2002-2014



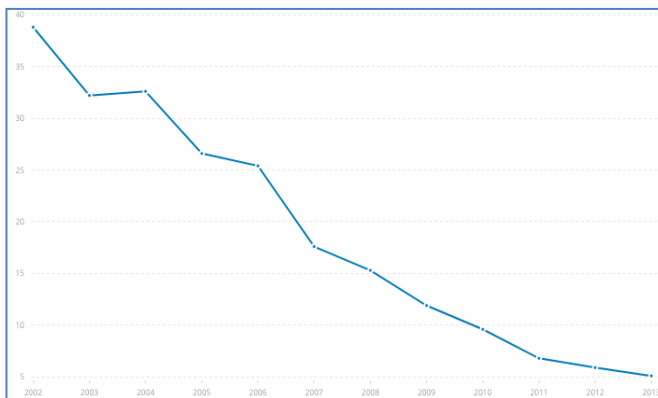
Source: World Bank 2018

Figure 4. Poverty headcount ratio at \$5.50 a day (2011 PPP) (% of population) in Turkey, 2002-2014



Source: World Bank 2018

Figure 5. Rural poverty headcount ratio at national poverty lines (% of rural population) in Turkey, 2002-2013



Source: World Bank 2018

While the level of income inequality (measured by the Gini index) has not decreased since 2002 (Figure 3), the significant expansion of social assistance has reduced poverty (both urban and rural) over the last fifteen years (Figures 4 and 5). In other words, although the main beneficiary of the AKP's economic policy is the Turkish bourgeoisie (especially its Islamist wing), its social policy has made limited improvements to the living standards of low-income groups. This has contributed to the AKP's hegemony in poor neighborhoods and villages.

4 The AKP's hegemony over hazelnut producers of the eastern Black Sea region

In 2015, Turkey produced about two-thirds of the world's total hazelnut export (Turkish Statistical Institute 2016). Rural areas surrounding the city of Ordu (located in the eastern Black Sea region) supply one-third of Turkey's hazelnut production (T.C. Gümrük ve Ticaret Bakanlığı Kooperatifçilik Genel Müdürlüğü 2017). Small and medium-sized farms dominate hazelnut production. Although family labor is commonly used, the picking of hazelnuts during summer months generally requires the employment of wage labor, supplied by a significant number of Kurdish seasonal workers coming from southeastern Turkey. Because opposition parties, journalists, and scholars have continuously claimed that government policies harm hazelnut production and small producers' interests (CHP 2016;

ince 2012), the AKP's consistently strong electoral performance in Ordu is a puzzle deserving of careful attention. In order to solve this puzzle, an investigation of the interplay between small and medium-scale farmers, farm workers, capital (hazelnut traders/exporters and both Turkish and foreign agribusinesses purchasing hazelnuts for the production of chocolate and other products), and the AKP government is necessary.

Table 2. The AKP's vote share in Ordu

General election		Local election		Constitutional referendum		Presidential election	
2002	41.5%	2004	40.2%	2010	63.47%	2014	66.98%
2007	55.8%	2009	42.5%	2017	61.88%		
2011	60.2%	2014	52.6%				
June 2015	53%						
Nov 2015	63.1%						

Sources: www.secim.haberler.com; www.secim-sonuclari.com; Turkish Statistical Institute 2012

Class power (and struggle) in the hazelnut sector occurs on two main levels. The first level includes farmers and capital struggle over the market price of hazelnuts. Farmers demand prices significantly higher than those traders/exporters/corporations prefer to give. The Union of Hazelnut Sales Cooperatives (*Fındık Tarım Satış Kooperatifleri Birliği*, often called *Fiskobirlik*), founded in 1935, is a quasi-public entity. On the one hand, it represents all hazelnut producers and collects membership fees from them. On the other hand, it has acted as a government institution in regulating the hazelnut market. From the mid-1960s to the mid-2000s, Fiskobirlik purchased hazelnuts from its member cooperatives on behalf of the government treasury at pre-determined prices. Fiskobirlik has also processed hazelnuts in its factories and marketed them in national and international markets through its trading branches and stores (Fiskobirlik 2017). On the other hand, private capital –of both Turkish and foreign agribusinesses– has been an important player in the hazelnut sector. Fiskobirlik and government agencies have taken agribusiness interests into account when setting purchase prices. However, due to the significant bargaining power of farmers, capitalist interests have not unilaterally determined hazelnut prices. Historically, political concerns have been important in price determinations. During the 1960s and 1970s (the height of social movements and influence of the radical left in Turkey), hazelnut producers organized many meetings and demonstrations. As in the rest of the country, the radical left was harshly suppressed after the military coup of 1980. Hence, there is a notable rupture/discontinuity with regard to the organization of the radical left in the region. Price issue has also been a central theme of political party competition in the region. With the exception of the 1980-1982 period, during which political parties were banned, electoral competition has been lively and hazelnut prices have been a central theme of electoral politics in the region.

On the second level of class conflict, farmers' interests clash with those of farm workers. Although the average farm size is small, the picking of hazelnuts during summer months often requires outside labor. The great majority of farm workers come from the Kurdish-majority region of southeastern Turkey, especially since the forced migration policy of the mid-1990s, which quickly displaced and urbanized the Kurdish population in the countryside (Yörük 2012, 521, 544). Kurdish farm workers are probably the most exploited section of the working class in Turkey. Their wages are very low, and they lack decent working conditions, as well as social protection. As a result of the long history and increasing intensity of the Kurdish question (conflict between the Kurdish insurgents and the Turkish army has continued since 1984), class antagonism between Turkish farmers and Kurdish proletariats involves an important ethnic dimension (Pelek 2010). Besides labor exploitation, Kurdish workers face exclusion, and oftentimes-outright hostility, from local residents and state officials. A large number of physical attacks –some of them lethal– against the Kurdish migrant workers have taken

place.⁶ Given the significant weakening of the radical left – the only force, which could act against chauvinism among the Turkish farmers– the ethnic dimension of agrarian labor relations has continuously swayed the politics of Turkish farmers in a right-wing nationalist direction. During our recent fieldwork in Ordu, farmers told us that they supported the government because of its fight/pushback against the PKK. They also expressed sympathy for the Turkish government’s anti-imperialist discourse against Western powers and approved the government’s emphasis on the need to decrease Turkey’s dependency on Western countries for the supply of military equipment through boosting national armaments production. The AKP’s hegemony in rural Turkey should be contextualized within these two terrains of class conflict in Ordu.

As in other parts of the Turkish countryside, economic crises and the neoliberal assault between 1999 and 2001 paved the way for the AKP’s first election victory in Ordu in 2002. Nevertheless, soon after the election, farmers began to believe that the government was favoring the interests of the hazelnut traders/exporters. Cüneyd Zapsu, one hazelnut exporter, became the personal target of farmers’ criticisms. Due to his foreign business networks, Zapsu, though not a parliamentarian, became an advisor of the then Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan. Zapsu’s influence over Erdoğan, and therefore, on government policy, was believed to be stronger than that of cabinet members. Farmers believed that Zapsu was using his influence to keep hazelnut procurement prices (set by the government) low in order to increase the profits of his export company, a belief that some hazelnut exporters publicly admitted (*Cumhuriyet* 2003a). Major opposition parties openly voiced dissatisfaction and blamed the government for the betrayal of hazelnut producers (*Cumhuriyet* 2003c, 2003g). More importantly, the AKP did not have control over top management of Fiskobirlik at that time. Fiskobirlik executives openly criticized the government for the low hazelnut prices and held meetings with the leaders and representatives of major opposition parties, which were reported in the media (*Cumhuriyet* 2003e, 2003h). Fiskobirlik also struggled with serious financial difficulties at the time. Fiskobirlik management requested government assistance for its credit applications to public and private banks, but the government refused. As a result, Fiskobirlik frequently delayed its payments to farmers for past purchases. The public perceived this as the AKP’s punishment of Fiskobirlik for its refusal to side with them (Ekşi 2006; Karpat 2006).

Farmer dissatisfaction also deeply impacted the government party. In the early 2000s, criticisms of the AKP’s policies (both within the AKP and by other parties and organizations) were far greater than it is today. Several AKP officials heavily criticized Zapsu in 2003. In a meeting among the executive committee of AKP founders, Ordu deputy Enver Yılmaz stated that “we are producers but some people are doing things as they wish, without consulting with us” (*Cumhuriyet* 2003f). Giresun deputy Nurettin Canikli blamed Zapsu for making advance export deals with foreign companies, pressuring the Fiskobirlik management and government officials to set low prices, and causing huge losses for producers and the state treasury. Canikli also blamed Ali Babacan, then the Minister of State in charge of Economy, for heeding Zapsu’s demands, and warned him that he was putting himself at risk to be put on future trial at a supreme court for the economic losses his decisions were causing (*Cumhuriyet* 2003d, 2003c). Soon after, Canikli was dismissed from his position at the central party executive committee (*Cumhuriyet* 2003i).⁷

Growing dissatisfaction with the hazelnut policy was a serious obstacle to the AKP’s attempts to expand its mass support in the region. Its share of the popular vote decreased slightly, from 41.5% in the general elections of November 2002 to 40.2% in the local elections of March 2004 (Table 2). Mass dissatisfaction regarding hazelnut prices continued over the next few years, finally culminating in 2006, the first year that the AKP government left the power of price setting entirely to the authority of hazelnut exporters. For the first time in the history of the Turkish republic, hazelnut harvest season began without the government’s declaration of a minimum procurement price (*Cumhuriyet* 2006f), which slashed the market price almost in half. Ordinary farmers, Fiskobirlik, The Board of

⁶ Among a large number of examples, see CNN Türk 2016; *Hürriyet* 2017.

⁷ The relationship between Canikli and Erdoğan later improved. Canikli is Turkey’s current Minister of National Defense.

Agriculture, The Farmers' Union, and opposition parties opposed the move (2006c, 2006h). Growing farmer dissatisfaction led to a series of protests. On July 9, 2006, farmers protested against Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan during an opening ceremony of a private hospital in Ordu. An 80-year-old female protestor cried, "What happened to the hazelnut money? Tell me that." Erdoğan chastised the farmers, telling them to "Go and ask Fiskobirlik management. The government did not buy your hazelnuts, they did. Do not politicize this issue" (Cumhuriyet 2006a). Things finally erupted on July 31. About 100,000 hazelnut producers coming from different parts of the eastern Black Sea region gathered for a protest meeting in Ordu. After the meeting, protestors blocked the Ordu-Samsun highway for about eight hours before being dispersed by the gendarmerie and police forces. Many protestors and security forces were wounded (*Hürriyet* 2006). This is one of the largest (if not *the* largest) farmer protests in modern Turkish history. The public soon learned that AKP parliamentarians from Ordu called the local police chief, requesting that he disperse the protestors immediately, but were refused. Tayyip Erdoğan blamed the local police chief and gendarmerie commander for acting too leniently towards the protestors and ordered their reappointment to different posts (Cumhuriyet 2006d, 2006e).

Following the mass protest of July 31, small-scale protests continued. On September 6, protesting the government's hazelnut policy, the entire executive committee of the AKP's local branch in the Perşembe district of Ordu resigned (Cumhuriyet 2006 September 7). Three days later, the Association of Village Headmen of Perşembe staged a protest demonstration in front of the AKP's local office, during which the president of the association was arrested (Cumhuriyet 2006j). On September 19, 2006, farmers protesting low prices physically attacked AKP's Ordu parliamentarian Eyüp Fatsa at a local festival in the Gürgentepe district of Ordu (Cumhuriyet 2006l). Fatsa, who was saved by gendarmerie forces, claimed that protestors were members of illegal/terrorist organizations, even though one arrested protestor was found to be an AKP member and another the son of a local farmer (Cumhuriyet 2006l, 2006m). Farmers staged protests both before and during the opening ceremony of the Black Sea Highway in April 2007 (Cumhuriyet 2007a, 2007b).

Although the great majority of protesting farmers in the Eastern Black Sea region did not sway towards the radical left, the radical left's organizational efforts in the region should not be overlooked. The Union of Hazelnut Producers (*Fındık Üreticileri Sendikası, Fındık-Sen*), founded in 2004, played a significant part in organizing small farmers and participating in farmer protests (Fındık-Sen 2017). Some socialist organizations such as the Freedom and Solidarity Party (*Özgürlük ve Dayanışma Partisi, ÖDP*), the People's Houses (*Halkevleri*), the Socialist Democracy Party (Socialist Democracy Party, SDP), and the Communist Party of Turkey (*Türkiye Komünist Partisi, TKP*) have also worked in the region. The ÖDP organized a march of hazelnut producers from Trabzon to Ankara in the summer of 2006 (Cumhuriyet 2006b, 2006n). However, such efforts have not been very effective for three main reasons. First, the politics of the radical left in Turkey has not yet recovered from the twin shocks of the military coup of 1980 and the collapse of the Eastern Bloc in 1989-1991. Second, significant ethnic divisions of labor in the region (between Turkish farmers and the Kurdish farm workers they employ) shifted the politics further towards the nationalist right. Finally, the AKP government has been very careful in containing the radical left by all means possible. More than a decade after its foundation, Fındık-Sen's legal status as a union has still not been completely recognized. Radical left activists are under significant pressure. For example, despite their lack of political influence, local members of socialist organizations were the primary targets of police arrests following the July 31 mass protest (Cumhuriyet 2006g).⁸

⁸ Besides the weakness of the radical left, the weakness of the center-left Republican People's Party is also a factor behind the AKP's regional power. As a hazelnut producer in the Ulubey district of Ordu told us, "Hazelnut protests were held but they were not effective. The government did not care and came up with the TMO and subsidies. The people can't benefit from the other side (opposition parti RPP). There was Ecevit before, but now there is no one." Bülent Ecevit was the most popular leader of the center-left in the 1970s. He was the prime minister of the DSP-MHP-ANAP government between 1999 and 2002. He died in 2006.

Farmer protests demonstrated that the AKP's prospects in the region were not promising, unless there was a significant change in its hazelnut policy. The protests were alarming signals before the general election on July 22, 2007. Political polarization between Islamists and secularists increased before the election. Abdullah Gül, the then second most important figure (after Erdoğan) of the AKP, was chosen to be the presidential candidate of the party. The AKP claimed enough seats in the parliament to elect him. However, secular opposition (represented by the CHP in the parliament and numerous minor Kemalist groups outside the parliament) campaigned against Gül's presidency, which led the constitutional court to freeze the election process. On April 27, 2007, the military's top command issued a statement (known as the "e-memorandum") blaming the government for the erosion of secularist foundations of the Turkish state. Hence, the July 2007 election became a political battle of decisive importance. The AKP had to win the election, ideally by increasing its vote share, in order to cut the Gordian knot.

The AKP swayed towards a more populist-leaning hazelnut policy in 2007. During the first half of 2007, the government paid all its debts to farmers (for crop procurement and compensation of the losses caused by natural calamities such as drought and frost). Moreover, these 2007 payments were made in advance (*Cumhuriyet* 2007c; *Milliyet* 2007). More importantly, on July 9, less than two weeks before the election, the government announced a 28.75% increase in the minimum price of hazelnuts. Both the Fiskobirlik management and the local branches of the Board of Agriculture praised this decision (*Cumhuriyet* 2007d). Finally, small farmers and proletarianized villagers of the eastern Black Sea region viewed the AKP's social policy very positively (*Cumhuriyet* 2007e; İnce 2012). As a result, the AKP won 55.8% of the votes in July 2007. Compared to the 2002 election, this indicated an increase of its vote share by one-third. The AKP's vote share in Ordu has not decreased since.

Before 2007, the AKP government caused financial difficulties for the management of Fiskobirlik, which threatened the financial solvency and existence of the union. After the electoral victory of 2007, Fiskobirlik's management did not have much choice but to surrender to the AKP. In turn, the AKP swiftly took control of Fiskobirlik (Yıldırım 2007). Given the historical importance of Fiskobirlik in the hazelnut sector, its acquirement by the AKP represented a decisive victory and helped the party to further its hegemony in the region. Over the years, the government has since transformed Fiskobirlik into a branch of the Soil Products Office (*Toprak Mahsulleri Ofisi*, TMO), which has allowed for more direct government control over the hazelnut sector. In our fieldwork in Ordu, we observed that farmers no longer mention Fiskobirlik. They only refer to the TMO when discussing the government's procurement policy. The farmers stated that the AKP government is not responsible for the decline of Fiskobirlik. They believe that Fiskobirlik was haunted by corruption and factionalism and therefore lost its ability to function properly. According to one interviewee, "The liquidation of Fiskobirlik has nothing to do with the AK Parti government. Fiskobirlik went bankrupt. The state can't sustain it. People want jobs from the state, but it cannot do this. Even if the AK Parti's government goes, the state will not establish factories."

This discourse is strikingly similar to the post-1980s pro-privatization discourse of blaming government-run enterprises for becoming inefficient and corrupt. On the question of Fiskobirlik, the AKP seems to have succeeded in swaying the farmers to its side. Farmers also admitted that almost every rural household contained/contains one pensioner, as well as adult children having non-farm employment. Since the Turkish economy continues to grow and has not faced an economic crisis comparable to those in 1999 and 2002, locals do not feel significant economic pressure. Of course, there is no guarantee that this will continue forever. A future economic downturn could change popular perception regarding government performance.

In short, the AKP's broad support base among the hazelnut farmers in Ordu might be explained by four main factors. Firstly, economic crises and a neoliberal assault during the DSP-MHP-ANAP coalition government, as well as the general decline of center-right and center-left parties, created a significant void in mainstream politics, which has favored the AKP. Secondly, the farmer protests that peaked in July 2006, as well as the relatively unsuccessful electoral performance in 2004, helped AKP leadership to realize that a strict neoliberal policy would not work for the party. Intense political

polarization in Turkey has required significant expansion of electoral support. To this end, the AKP continues to broaden its support base in the agricultural sector, especially before elections. This has consistently been the case in every election since 2007. As one farmer in Ordu told us, “They are giving the subsidies in such critical periods, right before the elections or in March when all the producers go broke... They throw something at the people and the people jump on it.”

Thirdly, the AKP has significantly expanded social assistance in order to prevent the radicalization of the poor and proletarianizing villagers and to mobilize their support during elections. Finally, organizational weaknesses, as well as state suppression of the radical left and the creation of alternative farmer organizations, have helped the AKP to consolidate its hegemony in the rural eastern Black Sea region.

5 AKP’s hegemony over tea producers of the eastern Black Sea region

Attempts at expanding tea production around the city of Rize in the eastern Black Sea region date back to the late nineteenth century. The decisive steps towards this goal were taken immediately after the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. On 16 February 1924, the Turkish parliament enacted the “code 407 regarding the cultivation of hazelnut, mandarin, lemon, and tea in Rize province and Borçka district” (ÇAYKUR 2018; Ziraat Mühendisleri Odası 2016). Since then, the volumes of tea produced have increased gradually, and Turkey has become the sixth largest exporter of processed tea in the world in 2016 (ÇAYKUR 2016). As a result, tea, alongside hazelnut, has become one of the most important sources of income in the Black Sea region. Until 1984, there was a state monopoly in the tea sector. The state controlled the tea sector through TEKEL until 1971, when the General Directorate of Tea Enterprises (*Çay Kurumu*, ÇAYKUR) was founded as the only state-owned monopoly enterprise. In 1984, the restriction on the private investment in the sector was removed along with other liberalization reforms (ÇAYKUR 2018). The private sector started to invest in the procurement, packaging, and distribution of tea. However, despite the increasing private investments in the tea sector by national and transnational corporations, ÇAYKUR is still the most powerful actor in the procurement and distribution of tea. In 2016, ÇAYKUR purchased 53.1% of all tea produced. Despite the long debates over its privatization, ÇAYKUR has been excluded from the privatization program. In 2017, it was transferred to the newly created Turkey Wealth Fund.⁹ Rize is the most prominent tea producing city in the Eastern Black Sea region with 131.443 tea producers supplying 61,81% of all national production (ÇAYKUR 2016).

As Table 3 demonstrates, the AKP’s vote share has increased significantly since 2002 and the party is entirely dominant in Rize. The AKP’s relationship with the tea producers is therefore worthy of attention.

⁹ Turkey Wealth Fund was founded in 2016, just after the failed coup attempt in response to the economic fluctuations with the aim of “furthering developing and increasing economic stability in Turkey through the efficient and productive management of public funds”. (<http://www.turkiyevarlilikfonu.com.tr/EN/icerik/51/about-us>)

Table 3. AKP's vote share in Rize

General election		Local election		Constitutional referendum		Presidential election	
2002	44%	2004	46.4%	2010	76.04%	2014	80.57%
2007	53.66%	2009	46.80%	2017	75.06%		
2011	69.06%	2014	67.9%				
June 2015	66.76%	---					
Nov. 2015	75.88%	---					

Sources: www.secim.haberler.com ; www.secim-sonuclari.com ; Turkish Statistical Institute 2012

The continuation of subsidization is an important factor behind this success. As Table 4 shows, purchases by the ÇAYKUR did not decrease and subsidy payments continued. In addition to existing support mechanisms, the government has recently started to encourage producers to shift to organic tea production. The Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Livestock has designated specific locations in Rize for organic production and subsidized the organic tea producers more than other producers.

Table 4. Tea subsidy payments

Year	Number of producers	Amount of tea purchased (tons)			Subsidy amount (Kg/TL)	Total subsidy amount (TL)
		ÇAYKUR	Private companies	Total		
2009	178.727	592.330	503.385	1.095.715	0,115	126.007.175
2010	179.124	589.286	470.437	1.059.723	0,115	148.465.300
2011	183.188	652.024	573.195	1.225.219	0,12	147.026.315
2012	185.372	654.160	488.611	1.142.771	0,12	137.132.539
2013	186.606	671.072	494.495	1.165.567	0,12	139.868.082
2014	185.878	627.888	633.429	1.261.317	0,12	151.358.070
2015	184.415	680.182	641.545	1.321.727	0,12	158.607.227
2016	185.937	686.809	604.547	1.291.355	0,13	167.876.193

Source: <https://www.tarim.gov.tr/sgb/Belgeler/SagMenuVeriler/CAYKUR.pdf>

Our fieldwork in Rize revealed that delayed payments, favoritisms in quota arrangements and corruption in ÇAYKUR in previous periods were major problems for producers. Almost all producers whom we interviewed compared the current management of ÇAYKUR to previous periods and expressed their satisfaction with the current situation. One of them said, “Now, there is an appointment-based system. No nepotism. The state still does not purchase all the tea we produce. But the volume that will be purchased is pre-determined at the beginning of the season. The AK Party brought this system.” Another producer stated, “In the 1990s, ÇAYKUR was out of cash and not able to purchase tea from us. But today, it is. This government came to power and gave the money. Tea

prices decreased, but at least we can see our future today.” Especially the memory of the 2001 crisis is still very alive among the producers, when they talk about the developments in the AKP period. A producer from the İyidere district of Rize stated, “The 2001 crisis affected us adversely. ÇAYKUR had gone to pot. When (Recep Tayyip) Erdoğan came to power, he put ÇAYKUR in order. Both the workers and the tea producers did not trust ÇAYKUR. Now, a producer gets his money ten days after he delivers his tea.” The improvements in the management of ÇAYKUR and the timely payments to producers contributed to the successful image of the AKP government among the tea producers in Rize.

Construction and infrastructural investments have increased significantly in the AKP era. New highways, airports, bridges, housing estates, schools, hospitals, and mosques have been constructed. Although the AKP has not managed to solve the unemployment problem, the rise of construction and infrastructural investment has increased the employment prospects for the lower classes and provided certain sections an opportunity for upward mobility to join the middle class.¹⁰ This is also the case in Rize. One of our interviewees stated, “I had an old junky car 15 years ago. Now, I have six cars today. I am working in construction in addition to producing tea. The construction sector has developed in Rize.” In addition to the construction sector, producers have been diversifying their sources of income due to the fragmentation of land through inheritance. As lands are fragmented into smaller pieces, producers diversify their income by seeking jobs in the service sector, opening coffee houses, barber shops, grocery shops, etc. Also, in contrast to the previous decades, almost all households have at least one retired person who contributes to the household income.

Improvements in the welfare system and social assistance are also effective mechanisms behind the high popular support for the AKP government. Because the AKP period was marked by investments in the healthcare and education system, these areas were an important narrative among the interviewees. One of the tea producers stated, “Today, there is no difference between the (public) schools and (private) colleges.” Apart from education, improvement of the healthcare system is another significant factor that attracts the support of producers for the AKP government.

The expansion of the social assistance, in addition to welfare investments, has become effective in encouraging producers’ support for the AKP government. In addition to the effective use of social assistance and welfare mechanisms among the producers, the responsibility for poverty is associated with the lack of individual effort rather than the problem of the government policies. In other words, producers who support the AKP government perceive poverty as an individual problem caused by the individuals themselves in a context where social assistance and welfare mechanisms are sufficiently advanced. A tea producer stated, “They are helping the elderly. They are giving coal to the needy... There is no one poor in Rize. People who know how to do things, people who work are not poor.”

6 AKP’s hegemony over the proletarianized villagers of the Soma basin

On May 13, 2014, the Soma district of the city of Manisa (located in the interior Aegean region) witnessed the deadliest mine accident in Turkish history (and one of the deadliest in world history). The number of casualties the accident caused once again revealed that coal mines in Turkey lack basic safety precautions. Turkey has undergone a coal production boom in recent years. Among several, one reason for this boom is the increasing demand for coal due to the expansion of coal assistance to low-income families (discussed above). Although most of the coal mines in Soma are *nominally* state-owned, the AKP government has *de facto* privatized the sector through subcontracting agreements that give private enterprises the right to mine coal. The deadly accident occurred in a mine owned by Soma

¹⁰ Bello (2018, 43) identifies a similar process under Thaksin’s rule in the 2000s: “The complex character of Thaksin’s rural mass base stemmed from the fact that the spread of capitalist production relations and the commercialization of land had contradictory effects, impoverishing some while providing an opportunity for others, including people who were able to access the pro-Thaksin government support to help them build small businesses. Both losers and winners appeared to come together in support of Thaksin.”

Coal Enterprises (*Soma Kömür İşletmeleri*), one of the country's largest private mine companies which owns one of the most successful private coal mines. Due to the extreme intensity of coal production, company management and engineers were all aware of impending risk. However, instead of reducing production, managers chose to keep the mine running in order to meet the high market demand and to boost their profits. Government supervisors did not pressure the company to take security precautions more seriously. Hence, the death of 301 miners cannot really be considered an accident but an event which everybody turned a blind eye to (Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Soma Araştırma Grubu 2015).

The rise of coal mining is closely related to agrarian change in the greater Soma basin, including the Soma and Kırkağaç districts of Manisa city, the Kınık district of İzmir city, and the Savaştepe district of Balıkesir city (Çelik 2017, 797). Small-scale tobacco production was the main source of income for rural households in the Soma basin until the early 2000s. As mentioned previously, the Tobacco Law of 2001 reduced the cultivation area and state support of tobacco production. The AKP government has not changed this law and continues to follow the neoliberal tobacco policy enacted by the previous government. As a result, the number of tobacco producers in Turkey dropped from 405,82 in 2002 to 56,000 in 2015 (Tütün Eksperleri Derneği 2016, 2). The rapid expansion of coal mining in Soma absorbed a large portion of dislocated tobacco producers in the basin. Before the mine accident, there were about 15,000 miners in Soma, with 7,000 of them working in the mines of Soma Coal Enterprises (Çelik 2017, 786). In short, many tobacco farmers have turned to mining.¹¹

Interestingly enough, despite the decline in tobacco farming and unstable working conditions in the mines, the AKP's vote share in Soma has not decreased. As Table 5 shows, the AKP's vote share has remained stable in three local elections but significantly fluctuated during general elections. With the exception of June 2015, however, the AKP has performed significantly better in every election, when compared to 2002. Of course, people make voting decisions as a result of a complex amalgam of various different factors. For instance, the AKP's vote increased by nearly 10% within only five months (from June to November 2015) in Soma, as well as in Turkey in general. It is well known that the continuation of the war due to the cease of the peace process with the PKK, as well as the AKP's effective use of propaganda –that since no party other than itself is able to win enough votes to form a single-party government, Turkey would be run by coalition governments, which would further destabilize the country and lead to an economic crisis and rise of terrorist attacks– played a significant role in this success. However, it is also clear that the decline of tobacco farming and the continuation of poor working conditions were not enough to decrease the AKP's regional power. Also, the wave of anti-government protests (which many miners and their families participated in) after the death of the 301 miners ebbed quickly and did not change the political landscape in Soma.

Table 5. The AKP's vote share in Soma

General election		Local election		Constitutional referendum		Presidential election	
2002	39.7%	2004	44.26%	2010	55.56%	2014	47.3%
2007	51.2%	2009	43.1%	2017	53.1%		
2011	52.8%	2014	43.3%				
June 2015	39.87%						
Nov 2015	49.65%						

Sources: www.secim.haberler.com; www.secim-sonuclari.com; Turkish Statistical Institute 2012

¹¹ Miners of other regions such as Zonguldak (a city located in the western Black Sea region, which, until recent years, had been the center of coal mining in Turkey for about a century) who lost their jobs also migrated to Soma to be employed in the mines.

Two factors seem worthy of note in understanding the AKP's significant power in Soma. Firstly, proletarianization has negatively impacted the livelihood of small-scale tobacco farmers but has increased the average household income in the region. For the local people, leaving their villages and settling in the town of Soma has meant acquiring the ability to obtain a credit card from a bank, which allows them to cover the costs of marriage and other essential needs. Because of this, families are more willing to allow their daughters to marry miners than farmers. Several mines managed by Soma Coal Enterprises were closed after the mine accident. As a result, 2,831 miners lost their jobs. This resulted in a loss of income for about 10,000 people, approximately 10% of Soma's population (Arslan 2015; Çelik 2017, 786). Although the incident clearly illustrated that working conditions in the mines were very unstable, and even though miners were guaranteed several months of unemployment wages, the miners who lost their jobs protested this decision and demanded the immediate reopening of the mines (*Milliyet* 2014).

The second factor that may help explain the AKP's regional power is its effective use of social policy. Free healthcare and education, as well as in-cash and in-kind transfers to low-income groups, have played a particularly important role in the containment of political risks associated with the mine accident. Ten days after the incident and following mass protests, government and protestor representatives signed an agreement including a long list of promises, after which protests declined (*Milliyet* 2015). Some of the items on the list were put into practice. Four months after the accident, for example, the government passed a law which gave one public sector job to each family who lost a member in the accident.¹² The Turkish Mass Housing Administration (*Toplu Konut İdaresi*, TOKİ) allocated two houses to each family which lost a member in the accident. TOKİ subcontracted the construction of these houses to the private sector (*Milliyet* 2016), making this a typical case of social neoliberalism. In addition, the central government and municipal administration (run by the AKP) has provided significant in-cash and in-kind assistance to these families. Because of these significant provisions, political risks have been contained.

Interestingly enough, social assistance has been effective in containing even the most rebellious sections of miners in the region. The recent foundation of the Soma 301 Miners Social and Solidarity Association (*Soma 301 Madenciler Sosyal ve Yardımlaşma Derneği*) is the most dramatic example of the role of social assistance in the AKP's regional hegemony. A family of a miner who died in the accident founded the association. The family participated in the protests against the neglect of security standards in the mines and the AKP government's collaboration with mine owners. They also participated in the Social Rights Association (*Sosyal Haklar Derneği*, SHD), a leftist association supporting the defense of the social rights of workers and the oppressed. After three years of struggle, the family left the SHD because it does not collect donations from the public and has failed to bring tangible material benefits to the families. The family has since founded the Soma 301 Miners Social and Solidarity Association. About twenty other families of members who died in the accident joined the association. The municipal administration controlled by the AKP helped the new association to locate an office, and the district administration provided the office furniture and equipment free of charge. The local branch of the Directorate of Religious Affairs covered the cost of the dinner served at the opening ceremony.¹³

¹² Following this law, families of workers who died in mine accidents in other places (such as Zonguldak) demanded the expansion of the coverage of this measure to include the entire country (*Milliyet* 2017). In February 2018, the government accepted this demand and announced a new draft law, scheduled to be legislated very soon, guaranteeing one public sector job to each family who lost a member in a mine accident in Turkey. As the parliamentary and presidential elections are scheduled for 2019, and there is a possibility of an early election, this is a timely political decision.

¹³ We thank Coşku Çelik for sharing this valuable information she gathered during her fieldwork in Soma.

7 Results and Prospects

Four main conclusions can be drawn from our study. First, since the center-left and center-right parties lost much of their credibility during the 1990s, and because two severe economic crises and a harsh neoliberal assault took place during the DSP-MHP-ANAP coalition period (1999-2002), a large proportion of small farmers and proletarianized villagers did not associate the AKP with the unpopular neoliberal policies. Second, as the case studies of Ordu, Rize, and Soma reveal, the rural masses have not been entirely silent during the AKP period. They have used both protests –sometimes massive and aggressive ones – and the ballot box as mechanisms of negotiation with the government. Third, although the AKP has not shifted away from a neoliberal agricultural policy, it has selectively used the agricultural support mechanism to maintain its support base among small farmers. More important, by expanding the coverage and quantity of in-cash and in-kind social assistance to low-income groups, the AKP has sustained its support among the poor and proletarianized villagers. These practices have helped the AKP to maintain a relatively positive perception among the rural masses. Finally, the AKP government has continuously suppressed radical farmer and socialist organizations in order to prevent the emergence of emancipatory rural politics in protest of or in response to the AKP's authoritarian populist politics.

Although this study paints a generally bleak picture regarding rural politics in contemporary Turkey, the intention is not to disseminate pessimism, which has been prevalent among leftists in contemporary Turkey. The persistent environmental struggle against the new mining and hydroelectric station projects waged by small farmers and activists working across the urban-rural spectrum have led to the cancellation of many projects during the AKP period. Also, this paper shows that the rural masses have not been entirely passive and have managed to win tangible material concessions from the AKP.

On the other hand, it is clear that the great majority of rural protestors have continuously supported the AKP, and the left has remained weak and marginal. As the world is currently witnessing the rise of far-right politics of various sorts, there is no magic formula to solve this political problem in Turkey, but there are some key arguments to be made for the discussion and practice of a new emancipatory rural politics. First, the left should stop reading agrarian change during the AKP period as a simple process of de-agrarianization and impoverishment of the peasantry. As we have seen, the process has been much more complex. Although the world economic crisis negatively impacted Turkey (especially in 2008-2009), Turkey has *not* witnessed an economic crisis comparable to those in 1999 and 2002. In fact, per capita income has grown by 8% since 2002. Moreover, as we have shown, the rural masses have received a significant degree of material concessions from the AKP. In short, people are *not* acting entirely irrationally. Moreover, as the world economy has not recovered from crisis, one cannot rule out the possibility of an economic crisis in Turkey like that of 1999 and 2001.

It should be noted that the last crisis brought the AKP to power, and there is absolutely no reason to expect that a future crisis would empower a progressive alternative. However, progressive forces should nevertheless prepare for crisis by organizing campaigns in order to give voice to current economic problems and to demand greater agricultural support expenditure, the creation of new jobs, and stronger social protection. Short-term campaigns waged by a small handful of organizations will not work. Instead, a large-scale and united effort is needed in order to place economic problems and demands at the forefront of politics – the only potentially effective act that might break authoritarian right-wing hegemony over the lower classes. As shown above, social assistance has worked to contain even the most rebellious sections of the lower classes. The government controls enormous economic resources, and at least in the realm of social assistance, no political force, even the CHP –the strongest mainstream party in Turkey– can compete with it. Hence, progressive forces cannot (and should not) engage with such competition, because they cannot win. They should, however, take this issue very seriously and establish mechanisms of material and economic solidarity as a backbone for their united political efforts.

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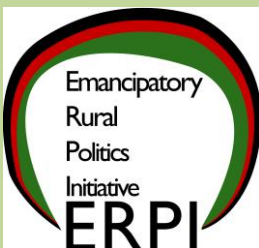
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