

Culture of Everyday Politics – Politics of Everyday Culture: An Inquiry into Municipal Politics in Konya and Eskişehir (Turkey)

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Local politics, not only in Turkey, but also elsewhere, is often considered a matter of public administration only and therefore side-lined in political analysis. In spite of this understudied nature of local politics, I believe that its study would help in understanding fundamental aspects of Turkish politics such as political mobilisation, establishing links between voters and politicians, various ways of decision-making and the role of civil society. Research that focuses on party programs, that uses surveys or that seeks to apply theoretical models often has difficulty explaining what happens ‘on the ground’. My research, on the contrary, was led by the question of how municipal politics were practiced on a daily basis. In addition, I was convinced that analysing municipal politics might illuminate the corner-stones of the AKP’s continuous electoral success since 2002. Turkey is a country characterised by major differences in ethnic privilege and class-related lifestyles that also manifest geographically. The successful adaption to different local contexts through taking into account patterns of social interaction and by adapting political messages to local practices and understanding seems to be a competitive advantage of the AKP. The Refah Partisi (RP, Welfare Party), one of the predecessors of the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, Justice and Development Party), has been perceived as the founder of a conservative municipal practice relying on primary identities (ethnic, religious, kin, *hemşehrilik*) for political mobilisation and activism. Additionally, they distinguished themselves from other parties by their extensive welfare provision. Many of those active in the AKP today started their career in the RP, e.g., President Erdoğan acted as RP Mayor of Istanbul (1994-1998); thus the AKP had a strong municipal practice when it came to power in 2002. My book explores whether the AKP is part of a *muhafazakar belediyeçilik* (conservative municipalism) tradition founded by the RP, how it adapts to local contexts, and to which extent such practice might have contributed to its political success, particularly in comparison with the main opposition party CHP (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, Republican People’s Party).

The book is based on a comparative study of municipal politics in two cities, Eskişehir and Konya in Central Anatolia, Turkey. I chose them as their greater municipalities were ruled by different parties, the AKP in Konya and the CHP in Eskişehir. Additionally, I researched four district municipalities (Konya Meram and Selçuklu ruled by the AKP; Eskişehir Tepebaşı (CHP) and Odunpazarı (AKP)). Another reason to choose the two cities is that they are very comparable in many aspects (geography,

population structure, unemployment numbers etc.) but ascribed very different images by the people in Turkey. Although located in proximity to each other, in terms of character, political culture and municipal governance, they show large differences. Whereas Eskişehir has a reputation as being a “modern” city whose municipal governance has been under the control of the center-left, pro-secular CHP. Konya, on the other hand, has been one of the prominent bastions of religious conservatism where traditionally pro-Islamist parties have scored highest in national and municipal elections. At the time of this study, the AKP controlled the greater municipal administration of Konya, as well as one of the district municipality’s in Eskişehir.

Methodologically, the research is based on participant observation and over 50 interviews. Fieldwork spanned a period of 1,5 years in total and was supported by a research scholarship provided by the Orient Institut Istanbul, the International Macquarie Research Excellence Scholarship (iMQRES) provided by Macquarie University, Sydney; as well as a TÜBİTAK research scholarship.

My research contributes to a growing but selective body of literature on municipal practice and local politics in Turkey. Until today most of this literature deals with Istanbul. The thesis thus adds important insights by focusing on two Central Anatolian towns. Also, most studies date from the 1980s and ’90s whereas my work assesses whether their findings are still up to date. Moreover, it helps to comprehend more fundamental aspects of Turkish politics such as political mobilisation, the establishing of links between voters, municipalities and parties as well as decision-making processes. In more general terms the present research demonstrates ways to analyse how politics influence local culture and vice-versa.

The main argument of the thesis is that the municipalities in Turkey do not only provide various services to their inhabitants by adapting to the “culture of everyday politics” but also seek to reshape the local social and political conditions in accordance with their ideological orientations and particular visions of what cities should be like, a practise I termed as the “politics of everyday culture”. It describes how the mayors and their administrations are actively involved in both adapting to the local context and changing it through a variety of means ranging from urban planning to the organisation of cultural festivities.

The main fields of research are mayoral biographies, municipal practice, in particular with regard to welfare and service provision, the cooperation with other municipal actors like political parties or civil society organisations, urban planning activities and cultural policy. The book illuminates how municipal political actors respond to different local contexts in the two cities. I argue that one reason for the national success of the AKP is its ability to adapt to divergent local contexts. To this end I explore whether the AKP is part of a *muhafazakar belediyeçilik* (conservative municipalism) tradition founded by the RP. Secondly, I analyse how in return also municipalities try to shape local contexts according to their political background by their municipal practice, urban planning activities and cultural policy.

Despite the divergent party ideologies driving each municipality, the book identifies the pillars of a culture that often transcends party ideology of AKP and CHP and

addresses questions such as: What role does the local context play in politics and how do political parties adapt to it? What role does the “culture of everyday politics” play for municipal practice? Is there a difference in municipal practice between the AKP and the CHP? Is the AKP’s municipal performance a cornerstone of its national success? To which extent is municipal politics an expression of local dynamics? Or is it instead dominated by the nation-state?

After discussing the (political) histories of Eskişehir and Konya, I provide detailed information and analysis about the role and performance of the mayors, the linkages between national and local politics, how municipalities seek to serve the people while they also shape the environment in which they live, and the nature of the cultural policies of the municipal governments in the two cities. Here I go beyond dualistic perceptions of centre and periphery, or elites vs. the people, focusing rather on the many relationships and links existing between national and local, local elite and community, as well as various local actors such as mayors, municipal institutions and employees, political parties, civil society organisations, ethnic and religious groups and prominent local figures.

In subsequent chapters, the discussion of the roles of the mayors and local elites, and the influence of the national party leadership over local politics, sheds light on the workings of local government in Turkey. It illustrates the point that municipal politics have not acted as the nursery of democratisation, as often assumed. Whereas it disputes the idea that civil society organisations in Turkey are weak, it nevertheless points out that they are generally attached to particular political parties, and that at the local level their power frequently depends on their closeness to the mayor. Equally, the mayors themselves depend on the support of the party’s national leadership, and tend to be nominated by it – an effective illustration of the highly centralised, top-down nature of Turkey’s political system. As a result, the research demonstrates that political, cultural, social and economic factors should not (and cannot) be separated when analysing municipal politics in Turkey. They are clearly interlinked with regard to their organisation as to their content. Consequently, formal and informal structures cannot be separated; often informal structures support formal ones and provide for their legitimacy and efficiency. The degree of “personalisation” of local politics is quite remarkable. In light of these factors the use of “Western” concepts such as “civil society” or “social movement” as analytical tools to explain local dynamics is at times problematic.