1 Introduction: Agency Matters

The Research Question and an Initial Glance at the JDP

Turkish politics was reshaped by a remarkable transformation at the beginning of the 2000s. The decreasing vote for the parties of the Islamist National View tradition (Milli Görüş Hareketi)¹ and of the total votes for the traditional centre-right² corresponded to the electoral breakthrough and success of a new party. The Justice and Development Party (JDP, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi), which was founded only a year before the general election in 2002 by politicians coming from different right-wing political backgrounds under the control of a formerly Islamist elite, won a landslide victory. Besides its Islamist (or, as discussed below, post-Islamist)³ credentials, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s JDP both consistently and convincingly presented itself as the ‘populist’⁴ defender of the downtrodden, excluded and despised sectors of Turkish society against the domestic and international elites who sought to oppress them.

After its first electoral victory, the JDP continued to receive 35–50 per cent of all votes until the presidential elections in 2014, when the JDP leader Erdoğan received more than 50 per cent of votes and became the

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¹ These Islamist parties are the National Order Party (Milli Nizam Partisi) and the National Salvation Party (Milli Selamet Partisi) in the 1970s, and the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi), the Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi) and the Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi) in the post-1980 period. For brief information on these parties as well as other significant political parties in Turkey, see Appendix 1.

² These are the True Path Party (Doğru Yol Partisi) and the Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi).

³ I borrow my definitions of Islamism and post-Islamism from Bayat (1996; 2007). Very roughly, while the former term refers to a strictly Islamist politics which follows a top-down strategy to Islamicize society, particularly through the seizure of the state, a post-Islamist movement refrains from such top-down strategies, adopts a perspective prone to reconciling religiosity with rights and liberties and embraces a pluralist stance where Islam is not considered the single truth and remedy for all social, political and cultural problems (Bayat, 1996: 44–46).

⁴ In this book I am using the approach proposed by Pierre Ostiguy (particularly 2009c and 2017) which evaluates populism as a response to ‘high’ political appeals/styles. I elaborate on the concept in Chapter 3.
first president of the Turkish Republic to be elected by popular vote. Afterwards, in 2015, the JDP became the first party in a general election and regained the parliamentary majority in a snap election in the same year. In 2017, the party won a referendum on a constitutional amendment that transformed the Turkish political system from parliamentarism to presidentialism. This last development was emblematic of the changes Turkish politics has undergone under the rule of Erdoğan's JDP. The JDP not only won a series of local and general elections and referenda but, at least since the Gezi protests in 2013 and Erdoğan's rise as the popularly elected president of the Republic in 2014, it has also driven Turkey's already fragile democratic system in a more authoritarian direction.

Throughout this period, apart from intra-party organizational difficulties entailed by the initial formation of the JDP by politicians with different backgrounds, the party also encountered many problems stemming from the corrosive effects of incumbency as well as social, political and economic crises. For example, in 2008 a legal case was initiated by the Constitutional Court (Anayasa Mahkemesi) attempting to ban the JDP, and the global financial crisis hit the country in the same year. In 2011 an earthquake left 600 people dead in provincial Turkey. Two years later, nine young people were killed under the circumstances of disproportionate police violence during the weeks-long wave of mass protests against the government. Episodic eruptions of armed struggle with the Kurdish separatists caused the death of many more people. Corruption probes against four ministers in 2013 imposed enormous damage on the image of the JDP government. A mine blast killed more than 300 workers in 2014, and many other ‘work accidents’ killed hundreds of workers throughout the JDP years. On top of all these, a huge humanitarian crisis emerged after the outbreak of Syrian Civil War, which brought more than 3 million refugees to the country. In the biggest terror attack Turkey has ever experienced, more than a hundred citizens who were attending an opposition mass meeting were killed. Finally, in July 2016, a foolhardy and bloody coup attempt by a faction of the Turkish Armed Forces tried to topple Erdoğan and the JDP government.

The extremely surprising fact was that these enormous problems neither influenced popular support for the party negatively nor caused any massive discontent within the JDP organization. In fact, Erdoğan’s party tightened its grip over Turkish society and politics by gradually building a ‘new authoritarian’ (Somer, 2016) or ‘competitive authoritarian’ regime (Esen and Gümüşçu, 2016). Eventually the JDP emerged as a

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5 See Rose and Mackie (1983) for a consideration of incumbency in government as a liability for parties, negatively influencing their electoral fortunes.
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‘hegemonic/dominant party’\(^6\) (Ayan Musil, 2015) that has remained in power for more than three terms through meaningful, free and competitive but increasingly unfair elections.

Thus, the rise of the JDP in Turkey was a very curious and interesting story of ‘political success’ in its own right when the term is understood in its Machiavellian sense as the party maintaining its grip on power. What kind of political circumstances paved the way for the rise of the JDP? More importantly: what strategic choices and actions of the JDP politicians substantially contributed to the party’s unprecedented electoral achievements and political resilience\(^7\) and, eventually, to its transformation into a hegemonic/dominant party in Turkey? What distinguishes Erdoğan’s JDP from other cases of populism that were less electorally successful and more politically vulnerable and, ultimately, incapable of transforming their political system according to their populist outlook? This book is a systematic explanation of the rise, the electoral achievements and the political resilience of the JDP in Turkey that particularly focuses on the political agency of the party, in other words, its political appeal and organization.

An Initial Glance at the Ideology, Organization and Policies of the JDP

One of the most illustrative documents defining the JDP’s position \(\text{vis-à-vis}\) the party’s Islamist legacy (the Islamist National View tradition), its electoral and elite competitors in the Turkish political system, and its position within the Turkish political history in general is a booklet written by one of its ideologues and prominent figures, Yaşar Akdoğan (2004), entitled *The Justice and Development Party and Conservative Democracy (AK Parti ve Muhafazakar Demokrasi)*. The suspicion of the powerful secularist circles regarding the Islamist past of this new party pushed JDP leaders to define their ideology in a very careful manner, and Akdoğan’s work was an outcome of this concern.

It is interesting to see that, in line with Bayat’s (1996) observations regarding Islamist politics and its transformations in the middle of the 1990s, the party’s most prominent ideologue defines political Islam as a

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\(^6\) I borrow the terms ‘hegemonic’ and ‘dominant’ parties from the excellent studies of the phenomenon by B. Magaloni (2006) and K. F. Greene (2007).

\(^7\) I use the term ‘resilience’ to refer to the durability as well as the cohesion of the JDP that enabled it to withstand consecutive social, economic, political and geo-political crises as well as interventions by powerful non-party elites, in contrast to its predecessors in Turkish politics.
strategy which pursues a top-down method to Islamicize society through the seizure of the state and political power (Akdoğan, 2004: 92). Akdoğan defines the political stance of the JDP quite differently from this understanding, calling it ‘conservative democracy’ (2004: 12–21). In order to avoid calling the party Islamist, he defines the JDP as the party of those with religious sensibilities (Akdoğan, 2004: 111).

Akdoğan also discusses the importance of democracy, human rights and secularism to the identity of the party, and their position within it. Akdoğan underlines the compatibility of these concepts with the demands of Islam (2004: 62–87). Hence, in line with Bayat’s definition of post-Islamism, the JDP and its conservative democratic identity were, initially, a decisive enterprise in reconciling ‘religiosity with rights and liberties’ and incorporating ‘Islam, freedom and pluralism’ (Bayat, 2013a: 8). This is why I define the JDP as a pioneering, electorally successful ‘post-Islamist’ party in the Muslim world. In contrast to its predecessor, the Islamist Welfare Party (Refah Partisi), the JDP was much keener to develop relationships with the West and with the European Union in particular, especially during its initial years, and was much more careful about protecting the democratic and secular qualities of the regime (Akdoğan, 2004: 106).

In the economic sphere, Akdoğan emphasizes that the JDP was in favour of a free market economy and a competitive economic understanding, which were compatible with the global system (2004: 13). Indeed, in the economic field, the JDP followed the structural adjustment programme of the International Monetary Fund (Ekzen, 2009: 475), which imposed widespread privatization and a drastic reduction in the size of the state. Nevertheless, the JDP also sought to improve income distribution through the use of public sources (Bakrezer and Demirer, 2009: 166). The JDP also deployed the networks of religious charities in order to reduce poverty (Buğra and Keyder, 2006: 224). Buğra and Keyder (2006) also argue that the JDP had an inclination to transform the very hierarchical and uneven corporatist welfare regime which ignored the majority who worked in the informal sector.

Following this post-Islamist phase, however, the JDP’s populist credentials have become more and more obvious, and ultimately it emerged as a hegemonic party that propelled Turkey into a competitive authoritarian regime. Over the years, the JDP has undergone profound changes. The publication of a recent book by Akdoğan (2017) entitled The Leader: Political Leadership and Erdoğan (Lider: siyasal liderlik ve Erdoğan) was emblematic of these changes. During the party’s initial years, as documented above, Akdoğan was trying to define a party identity based on a political-ideological stance. In this recent hagiographic account,
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however, he has given Erdoğan centre stage. This particular change in Akdoğan’s themes was a strong indicator of the transformation of the JDP from a post-Islamist conservative democratic vanguard into a populist and personalistic hegemonic party. Thus, this study also represents an answer to the question, ‘What kind of sources, instruments, and strategic choices and actions have made this transformation possible?’

Identifying the Theoretical Puzzle of the JDP: From Post-Islamism to Populism to a Hegemonic Party Autocracy

The case of Erdoğan’s JDP has always been a multi-faceted phenomenon, and since its rise to prominence, as the literature review below documents, students of Turkish politics have examined it from a variety of angles. So far, Erdoğan’s JDP has been evaluated as a case of the ‘normalization’ of a religious party (or a case of post-Islamism or Islamic liberalism), a case of populism and, more recently, a case of authoritarian predominance. In this book, I will touch upon all these problematics regarding the case of the JDP to varying extents, but the main focus here is to explain the political success of the party, that is, its extraordinary capacity to stay in power for such a long time. Therefore, the main problematic here appears to be the electoral success of the party and its capacity to transform the already fragile democratic system of Turkey (or its electoral democracy) into competitive authoritarianism. This was a very puzzling case of political success in three interrelated theoretical respects: firstly, regarding the ‘transformation of Islamist politics’; secondly, regarding ‘populism in power’; and, thirdly, regarding ‘the rise of a hegemonic party autocracy’.

8 For a detailed review of Akdoğan’s book in English, see Baykan (2017a).
9 For the term ‘normalization’, see the volume by Mecham and Hwang (2014b), and particularly their introduction in which the authors propose the term ‘normalization’ instead of ‘moderation’ since the latter term also assumes an ideological liberalization of Islamist movements. According to Mecham and Hwang, ‘normalization is a process by which Islamist parties increasingly accommodate themselves to the rules of the political regimes in which they operate; in other words, they become less unique and more normal political actors when compared with other parties in the competitive system’ (2014a: 6–7). Hence, ‘normalization’ has less-normative implications than terms such as ‘liberalization’ and ‘moderation’. It should however be noted that the concept of ‘normalization’ does not help researchers to grasp how the ‘normalizing’ political actor transforms the ‘normal’.
10 I do not claim that this new regime has already been established. As I discuss in Chapter 8, the rise of competitive authoritarianism and the hegemonic party autocracy in Turkey is still an ongoing, transitory process, although it has already passed a legally constitutive moment with the referendum on 16 April 2017.
How and Why Did an Islamist (and Later, Post-Islamist) Party Embrace Populism? The rise and subsequent electoral and political predominance of the JDP were, first of all, a solid example illustrating one of the potential trajectories of the transformation of Islamist politics. In its struggles with strictly secularist forces of the country (as delineated in Chapter 2) which did not shy away from certain repressive measures, Islamist political actors (most notably the National View movement) in Turkey gradually embraced a more conciliatory posture. It was from this tradition that the JDP finally emerged as a conservative democratic (or a post-Islamist) force. Nevertheless, since it came from a strictly Islamist political background, there has always been a very deep suspicion of – and even hostility towards – the JDP on the part of the secularist elites and secular social segments of Turkey. The JDP’s political success was achieved despite these widespread unfavourable attitudes and feelings towards both the party and Erdoğan among broad segments of Turkish society and elites. Hence, the JDP’s long-lasting hold on power was a very puzzling story of success given its political background and the highly intolerant secularist traditions of Turkey. While liberal Islamism or post-Islamism represented a certain phase and strategy of the normalization of Islamist politics in Turkey, it was a temporary and, more importantly, insufficient strategy for the survival of this particular political tradition. This is why populism, sometimes latently and sometimes more manifestly, has always accompanied the normalization of Islamist political actors in Turkey and gained a critical prominence as the threats and risks for the JDP and Erdoğan increased. Hence, the case of JDP very puzzlingly illustrates that the transformation of Islamic inclinations within politics and society may lead to results other than liberal democracy and violent Islamic fundamentalism. In the case of the JDP, this route led to populism (and then competitive authoritarianism). Given the fate of other Islamist and post-Islamist actors across the Muslim world, this was an exceptional outcome. How and why did an Islamist (and later, a post-Islamist) party embrace populism? What set of circumstances and, more importantly, strategic choices and actions paved the way to this particular outcome?

How Did a Populist Party Defy the Expectation That Populists Are Destined to Fail in Government? Populism is a problematic strategy for any party in office, and the JDP has always been required to counterbalance its populist responsiveness. This responsiveness has usually been in contradistinction to the responsibility required by a long-term tenure in office. Given the fact that the JDP has remained in office for such a long time, it is plausible that the party and Erdoğan relied on
different sources and invented new methods and instruments that other populist parties and actors across the world could not. In other words, in contrast to the common expectation, the case of Erdoğan and the JDP illustrated that populist forces are not destined to fail in government and that they are on the political stage to stay. So how did a populist party defy the expectation and common wisdom that they are destined to fail in government? What sources and methods granted such a long political life to Erdoğan and the JDP? How were the JDP and Erdoğan able to combine populist responsiveness with the precise amount of governmental responsibility to prevent any crises?

_How, in the Absence of Required Symbolic and Economic Resources, Did a New Political Actor Build a Hegemonic Party Autocracy?_

Another puzzling aspect of the JDP phenomenon is in regard to the regime change that it achieved. How did this new populist party with an Islamist background rise to a hegemonic/dominant party status under unfavourable conditions that included the lack of historical legitimacy granted by being the founding party, such as that enjoyed by the Party of Institutional Revolution (Partido Revolucionar Institucional) of Mexico; the lack of extensive natural resources that could be used to improve the repressive capacity of the state, such as those relied upon by Putin’s United Russia; and the lack of control over a massive public economic sector, such as that exerted by Chavismo in Venezuela. In the absence of these usually necessary symbolic and economic resources, how could a new political actor like the JDP rise to obtain hegemonic party status and transform the entirety of Turkish politics? What kind of sources, strategic actions and choices allowed Erdoğan’s JDP to build a competitive authoritarian regime under these unfavourable circumstances?11

Throughout this book, I draw attention to how agency-based factors (such as populism and party organization) to a great extent explain the theoretical puzzles posed by the case of Erdoğan’s JDP. First of all, this case shows that a particular political strategy – namely, ‘low-populism’ – is the best way to cope with the obstacles raised against Islamist party normalization and ensure the survival of the post-Islamist party in a setting that includes hostile and powerful secularist actors. More importantly, the theoretical argument of this study is as follows: the case of Erdoğan’s JDP demonstrates that, if a particular organizational model (which I refer to as the ‘personalistic mass party’ in this book) is

11 I owe this formulation of the puzzle of the JDP, as well as some of the arguments examining the party’s hegemonic position from an agency-based perspective, to a joint work with Murat Somer. See the draft paper by Somer and Baykan (2018).
embraced by populists in power in a political environment where the liberal democratic architecture is weak and where the symbolic and economic resources that other authoritarian political actors enjoy are missing, the rise of a ‘hegemonic party’, and therefore the growth of competitive authoritarianism, as a consequence of populist predominance is much more likely than other national contexts where populist parties and leaders do not have such organizational and economic resources, and where the political systems have strong liberal and constitutional institutions.

In this book, therefore, I propose an overwhelmingly agency-based explanation for the normalization and electoral achievements of the JDP and its authoritarian turn that focuses on the organizational and strategic reasons behind the party’s political success. This approach also complements the current literature on the party, which frequently focuses on the external-structural reasons for the rise and electoral success of the party. I argue that the JDP’s upward trajectory and political resilience, as well as its success at establishing a competitive authoritarian regime under the unfavourable circumstances in Turkey at the time, relied on the ‘low-populist’ appeal of the party and its tightly controlled, massive membership organization which was active year-round and which penetrated the remotest corners of the country. This massive and pervasive organization was built by and around a personalistic leadership and was supported by political marketing techniques. Therefore, in this book, the JDP is called a ‘personalistic mass party’. In short, I define the political appeal and organization of the JDP – the ‘low-populist appeal’ and the ‘personalistic mass party’ – as the essential agency-based factors behind the unprecedented political predominance of this new party in Turkey for more than fifteen years.

The Literature on the JDP

The rise and enduring electoral success of the JDP in Turkey have drawn remarkable attention from students of political Islam, Middle East politics and party politics in general. The JDP’s exceptionally successful ‘normalization’, as a party with an Islamist background, was one of the underlying reasons for this enormous interest. The JDP was strikingly successful, too, in protecting and increasing its vote steadily during previous elections, despite its position in power, or the negative

incumbency effect – a situation that has also increased scholarly interest in the party. More recently, following the authoritarian turn of the JDP, a series of academic studies have appeared that seek to describe and explain how Erdoğan’s JDP established its current authoritarian predominance (Ayan Musil, 2015; Esen and Gümüşçü, 2016 and 2017; Özbudun, 2014 and 2015; Somer, 2016). The wide-ranging literature focusing on the rise and electoral achievements of the JDP and its authoritarian turn, as I will illustrate, predominantly embraces the following perspectives: economy-based explanations; ideology/discourse-based perspectives; leadership-based approaches; and constituency-based perspectives (the rise of the so-called Islamic bourgeoisie).

In this part of the Introduction, I will show that the majority of the literature on the JDP focuses on factors other than the role of the party’s strategic and organizational agency in its electoral and political resilience. As I will illustrate in the following sections, even the most agency-based explanations do not fully focus on the role of the JDP’s organizational dynamics in the success of the party; they see the JDP (and therefore its political agency) simply as a reflection of wider external social, economic and political circumstances. This book, then, aims to contribute to the broader literature on the rise and electoral and political success of the JDP by highlighting the role of organization and strategy, in short, the agency of the party.

Research Focusing on the Economy

One of the oft-cited factors behind the electoral success of the JDP in the literature has been the growth of the Turkish economy, notably the decrease in consumer price inflation throughout the JDP’s rule and the dramatic rise of per capita income. Studies by Kalaycioğlu (2010: 39), Dağlı (2008: 29), Carkoğlu (2007: 515–516) and Öniş (2012: 137) underline the role of the economy in the electoral success of the party. One of the most prominent economists in Turkey, Korkut Boratav, also explains the political success of the JDP as an outcome of global economic cycles. According to his analysis, while the failure of previous coalition governments preceding the JDP corresponded to the downturn in the global economic cycles, the electoral breakthrough and the rise of the JDP are explained as resulting from the global economic recovery and rising foreign investments in Turkey (Boratav, 2009). There are also other economy-based explanations of the success of the JDP as resulting from its redistributive policies. In this sense, the studies of Bakırez and Demirer (2009), Öniş (2012: 137), D. Yıldırım (2009: 102) and
Yücesan-Özdemir (2012: 143–144) highlight the role of redistributive strategies in the party’s success. More recently, students of Turkish politics have pointed to new patronage-based relationships as the basis of the competitive authoritarian regime established by the JDP (Esen and Gümüşşü, 2017). In short, there is a remarkable literature highlighting the economic reasons for the JDP’s success that focuses on the role of macro-economic trends and redistributive mechanisms.

Research Focusing on Social Structural Dynamics and Constituency

Second, many studies of the rise and electoral success of the party highlight the role of the ‘Islamic bourgeoisie’ in Turkey. Until the 1980s, the state supported the businesspeople close to the secularist world-view of the establishment elite of the country (the Kemalist military and bureaucratic elite). Nevertheless, since the 1980s, and through the introduction of a more liberalized economic regime by the centre-right Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi) governments that replaced the import substitution regime of the previous era, small and medium-sized businesses that were conservative and religious in orientation gained momentum and started to grow. These business networks, or the ‘Islamic bourgeoisie’, tended to support, firstly, the Islamist parties of the National View tradition such as the Welfare Party, and then the JDP.


13 The studies about the JDP that focus on the role of patronage, clientelism and vote-buying should be seen within the framework of economic explanations and the redistributive agency of the party. Although I agree that these mechanisms and instruments contributed to the party’s success to a certain extent, I also propose a more nuanced understanding of the redistributive agency of the JDP, particularly in Chapter 5. I highlight the discursive, stylistic and organizational factors that differentiated the JDP’s engagement with patronage and clientelism from its centre-right predecessors.

14 See Keyder (2003) for these economic developments.