



Entanglements of Populism, Democratic Breakdown and Sacralization of Politics in Turkey

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The Justice and Development Party (AKP) has come to power in 2002 after a tumultuous decade of unstable coalition governments, the influential military's increasing intervention in civilian politics in the name of curbing the influence of political Islam and a deep economic crisis. Despite being a splinter from the major Islamist party in Turkey, the AKP rejected political Islam and promised 'clean' politics, stability and EU integration. However, from the very beginning, the AKP's self-defined ideology 'conservative democracy' presented a set of principles based on an anti-establishment discourse against the republican and secular elite. It managed to rally peripheral voters who were previously underrepresented by the secular-Kemalist establishment. However, the anti-establishment nature of the AKP's populism in its early years has gradually evolved towards a claim to strong leadership, polarization that threatens social cohesion and patronage that seizes power in all corners of political and economic life. The AKP has reduced democracy to the supremacy of the national will that is determined by unfair electoral competition and the party as the exclusive bearer of it.

In the first part, this lecture aims to link populism to the democratic breakdown in Turkey by tracing the evolution of populism during the AKP years from being corrective to a defective democratic regime to posing a threat to democracy's basic principles. I will illustrate how the AKP has re-produced the dichotomy at the heart of populism between 'the people' and 'the elites and enemies' by continuously bringing in and excommunicating out certain social and political groups. By utilizing the conceptual framework of 'sacralization of politics' with reference to the Italian political scientist Emilio Gentile, I will discuss how the AKP has kept its populist appeal alive and maintained mass support for its undemocratic governance through (1) missionary politics led and embodied by the venerated leader (2) constructing a community of the elect, (3) performance politics composed of symbols and rituals.

In the second part, I will turn to civic and grassroots oppositional movements with an anti-authoritarian and anti-populist agenda. The contestations of populist authoritarian entanglements take various forms and spatialities. I will particularly focus on the new women's movement that emerged after the 2013 Gezi protests. I focus on this movement not only because it has become one of the most sustained democratic civic opposition in contemporary Turkey but also it has emerged through the joint efforts of young secular and Muslim feminist activists that defy 'secular-Muslim polarization' through emergent norms and political frames developed in the course of collective action.