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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 November 3, 2002 represents the peak of Turkish Islamism. During the last fifteen years, the AKP has significantly transformed the Turkish economy, society, and politics. In the economic realm, by privatizing the great majority of the state-owned enterprises, the AKP has finished the job that the (relatively) secular parties of the center (right and left) started in the 1980s but had not made comparable progress. In other words, Turkish neoliberalism has been consolidated under the AKP rule. On the other hand, by supporting the Islamist bourgeoisie much more than the secular bourgeoisie through generous government contracts, state bank credits and other favoritisms, AKP has taken significant progress (although not completed yet) in altering the balance of power within the Turkish bourgeoisie in favor of its Islamist wing. AKP's transformation of the society and politics is related to but goes much deeper than its economic performance. The ruling party has implemented an ambitious project of unmaking the relatively secular character of the state and society and reconstructing them on an Islamist basis. To this end, the government has considerably altered the curriculum and personnel 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 a complex combination of carrots and sticks, 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 marginalized 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, AKP's significant mass support and uninterrupted rule notwithstanding successive serious crises is an undeniably remarkable success of that 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). AKP's vote share has been consistently higher in the countryside than in the cities (Table 1). The approval of the constitutional amendment establishing a super presidential system without checks and balances in the referendum on April 16, 2017 is a recent milestone of the 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 between 56% (Konda 2017) and 62% (Yetkin 2017).¹ Consistently significant support to 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), pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (*Cumhuriyet* 2015; *Demokrat Haber* 2017), numerous socialist parties and

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

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 making it entirely dependent on agricultural imports. Significant portion of news reports about agriculture and farmers published by the leftist and rightist (non-AKP) media outlets portrays a similar picture.²

Without denying the pro-capital and (by and large) neoliberal direction of AKP's agricultural policy, we argue that this interpretation does not help us to understand why rural population has supported the AKP until today. Such interpretations (sometimes explicitly but often implicitly) deny the rural population's capacity of comprehending their material gains and losses. They risk portraying rural people as staunch religious conservatives and nationalists whose political behavior will not change regardless of the changes in their living standards. Hence, they tend to reduce the question of political hegemony to a simplistic and narrower question of cultural values. They are also unable to inspire/inform a radical political project and organization that is alternative to authoritarian populism in rural Turkey.

This paper provides an alternative to existing explanations of the AKP's continuous power in the countryside by identifying its material basis. It pays attention to factors such as rural people's perception of government policies and their living standards historically – in comparison with those in the (recent) past-, their bargaining with the government (through street protests and the ballot box), and the resulting concessions they have 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 paper expands upon this point by identifying the role of "social neoliberalism" in the AKP's hegemony 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 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 lower classes have rejected and resisted against neoliberal shock therapy through street protests, armed insurgencies, revolutions, and the ballot box. By providing a variety of material concessions to low-income groups that can be branded as "controlled populism" (Güven 2016, 1007), social neoliberalism offers – at least a temporary-political fix to contain the radicalization potential of peasants and workers and win elections (Dorlach 2015, 521; Öniş 2012, 137).³

We argue that AKP has competently followed a social neoliberal policy line since 2002. On the one hand, it has followed the orthodox neoliberal prescription by completing the privatization of the 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 though limited increases of agricultural support and significantly expansion of the coverage and quantity of social assistance to the rural and urban poor. Despite the temporary economic slow-down of 2008-09 under the impact of the world economic crisis, Turkish economy has not faced a catastrophic crisis. The average annual growth rate of GDP per capita is 8% between 2002 and 2016 (World Bank 2018). This has created

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

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.

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 – that 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, lower classes in rural areas have utilized both the ballot box and direct action to bargain with the AKP government. Thirdly, although the AKP government did not fundamentally depart from the neoliberal agricultural orientation (set by the previous government), in response to villagers' use of street protest and ballot box, it has adopted policies that have eased the pressure on small farmers and proletarianized villagers – not entirely but to a limited extent- through bringing agricultural subsidies back and significantly expanding the coverage and quantity of social assistance to low-income groups. AKP's limited redistribution to lower classes has made the neoliberal transformation more manageable and hegemonic in the countryside. Finally, like all historical experiences of political hegemony combining carrot and stick, in addition to material concessions, the AKP government has also used coercive methods against the radical farmer organizations, socialist left, and Kurdish movement in order to keep them isolated from the masses and prevent the emergence of an emancipatory rural politics in Turkey.

This paper consists of six sections. After this introduction, the second section examines the historical reasons of the rural population's relatively positive outlook toward the AKP government and remaining distance from the opposition parties. The third section answers whether the AKP has completely de-agrarianized Turkey and impoverished peasants. We argue that there is not much reason to expect the villagers to blame the AKP government for their economic problems and support the opposition parties. We then substantiate this point through investigating the relationship between the villagers and AKP government. The fourth section examines the AKP's engagement with the hazelnut producers of the Eastern Black Sea region. The fifth section investigates the same question in the context of former tobacco farmers who have been proletarianized in the coalmines in 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.

2 Islamists' rural policy record (1996-97) and the neoliberal shock therapy in agriculture by the 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 of the tradition of legal Islamist parties in modern Turkey whose history goes back to the early 1970s. 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. RP won the İstanbul and Ankara metropolitan municipalities on March 27, 1994. It took 21.38% of the popular vote and became the first party in the general elections on December 24, 1995. A large portion of the founders of the AKP held important positions in the RP as top party officials, ministers, deputies, mayors, etc. AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was the mayor of İstanbul metropolitan municipality between 1994 and 1998.

Six months after the 1995 general election, RP formed a coalition government with the center-right True Path Party (*Doğru Yol Partisi*, DYP). RP-DYP coalition stayed in power between June 1996 and June 1997. Government support to the agricultural sector was high in 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 Turkish political economy in the entire post-1980 period- (OECD 2018). Hence, farmers did not have much to complain about 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 refuse to implement the reforms. This event is known as the "February 28 military memorandum." Following the memorandum, the alliance of the military command, secular bourgeoisie (including

those controlling the majority of 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, Islamist RP was removed from office – not by popular demand but by an army-led secular alliance- within just a year. Since the RP followed a populist agricultural policy, its removal from power by force 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 view as composed of devout people working for people’s interests. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – who was imprisoned for four months in 1998 due to reading an Islamic poem forced in a RP demonstration, stripped from his post as the mayor of İstanbul, and banned from parliamentary elections of 2002- became a popular Islamist figure in this period.

Later developments further consolidated the masses’ positive outlook to Islamists. The coalition government of the center-left Democratic Left Party (*Demokratik Sol Parti*, DSP), ultranationalist Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP), and center-right Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*, ANAP) stayed in power between May 1999 and November 2002. Two of the three severest economic crises of the post-1980 period (1994, 1999, and 2001) happened during the rule of the DSP-MHP-ANAP coalition. Compared to 1998, GDP per capita contracted by one-quarter in 2002 (World Bank 2018). The crises of 1999 and 2001 forced the government to take loans from the IMF that were conditional on the implementation of a harsh neoliberal policy package including drastic cuts in the agricultural support expenditures of the state. World Bank Vice President, Kemal Derviş was parachuted into the seat of the Minister of Economic Affairs in March 2001, with a mission to guarantee the 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 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 2017), it was far from alleviating the huge damage done to small farmers. The Tobacco Law 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 the previous forms of government support to agriculture and adopted the direct income support policy that provided cash assistance to farmers cultivating less than 50 hectares. Direct income support was provided to everybody documenting farmland ownership regardless of whether they actually cultivate or not. In other words, it cut the historically close link between government support and agricultural production. It primarily aimed to contain the risks stemming from the neoliberal assault on small farmers, especially the 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 the public opinion about the government policies. As a result, the coalition crumbled and scheduled an early election on 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 gave the message to the IMF, World Bank and Western governments that if CHP comes to power, “Derviş reforms” will continue. Putting the symbol of the neoliberal assault against small farmers and workers and Western control of the Turkish economy revealed the CHP’s neoliberal orientation clear 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 ago, got 34.3% of the popular vote, followed by the CHP whose vote was only 19.4% (Turkish Statistical Institute 2012). Due to the extremely undemocratic character of the Turkish electoral system, which only allows the parties above the 10% threshold to be represented in the

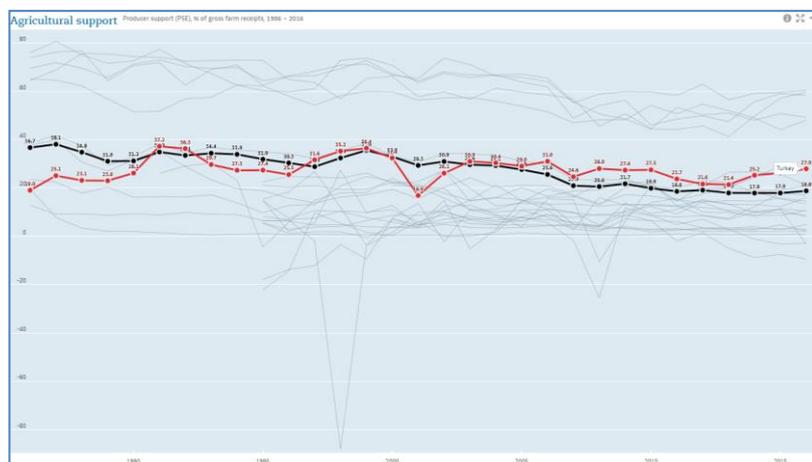
parliament, only AKP and CHP entered into parliament. AKP controlled the parliamentary majority and formed a government on November 19, 2002.

3 AKP's social neoliberalism in rural Turkey

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 have 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 the small farmers and proletarianizing villagers. Since the AKP inherited a very low 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 the direct income support, which cut the link between government support and agricultural production. In 2004, AKP government revised that policy by bringing the producer support (for crop production and animal husbandry) back (Güven 2009). Direct income support policy was terminated in 2010. Rather than simply reintroducing the older forms of producer support, AKP has liberalized the support policy. Agricultural regions of Turkey were divided into basins, each basin's products with (suggested) competitive advantage were listed, and subsidies and other forms of financial support were distributed accordingly. An increasing portion of the agricultural support has been given to 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 small ones (Gürel 2014; Oral 2010; Yıldırım 2017). Nevertheless, the level 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.

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



Source: OECD 2018.

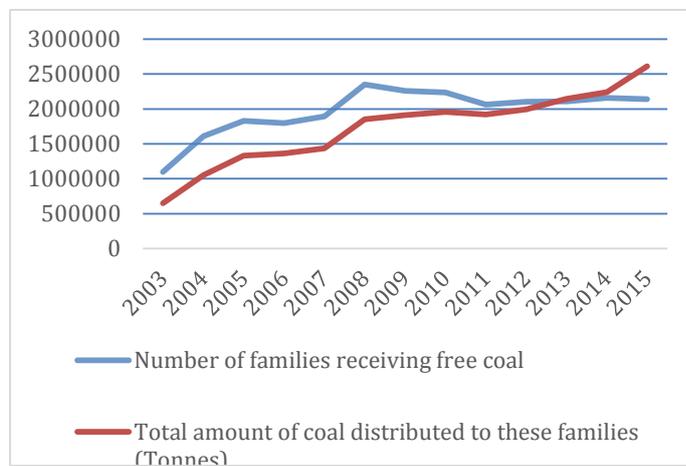
Note: Red and black lines represent Turkey and the OECD average, respectively.

The AKP government has also implemented a series of social policy reforms to consolidate and expand its support among the poor. Here we define the “poor” broadly, including the unemployed population, poor farmers, and full-time and part-time workers in low-wage jobs. AKP's social policy programs include means-tested provision of in-cash and in-kind assistance specifically targeting those below the official poverty rate. However, the appeal of social assistance is far broader than the absolute poor. In fact, similar to other countries like China (Chen et al. 2016), the case workers of the Ministry of Family and Social Security in Turkey have a significant degree of discretion of defining

who is poor and needs assistance. Hence a large number of low-income people receive assistance despite being above the official poverty rate (Aytaç 2014, 1218-1219). As the AKP's hold on power has consolidated, its control over the case workers and means-testing procedures has tightened. Similar to the use of social assistance to contain the political radicalization of the Blacks in the US during the 1960s (Piven and Cloward 1979) and the Maoist insurgency in rural India today (Planning Commission 2008; Biswas 2010), the AKP government has used social assistance to contain the Kurdish movement (Yörük 2012). In several occasions top public officials explicitly stated that they may consider freezing social assistance to families whose members participate in street demonstrations of the Kurdish movement (REFERENCES). The political use of social assistance has also been clear in the AKP's relationship with the Turkish poor. Here social assistance has been used to contain the protests in some occasions but more often for increasing the AKP's support base among the poor and win elections. As poverty rates have been higher in rural Turkey, social policy measures have played an important role in the AKP's continuous rural support.

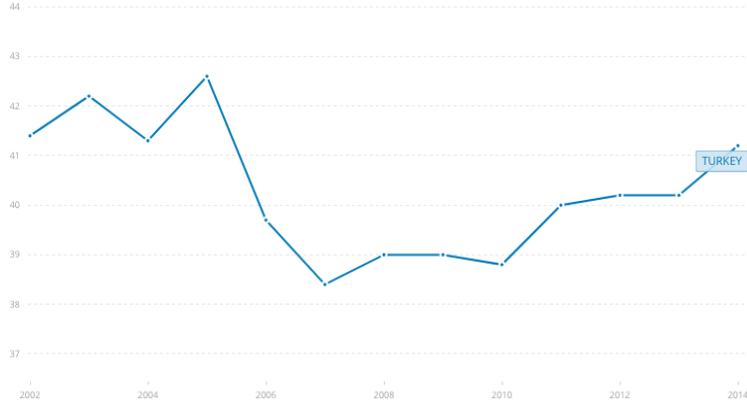
Between 2000 and 2010, the percentage of social assistance spending in total government spending increased by 266% (Üçkardeşler 2015). The share of the free health care card (Green Card) holders in the total population increased from 4.2% in 2003 to 12.7% in 2009. A universal health care system was established in 2012 and incorporated all Green Card 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-meal and transportation to school to 600 thousand students. The quantity and number of households receiving coal for heating has increased dramatically (Figure 2). Turkish government's regular in-kind and in-cash welfare provision to a poor family adds up to \$260, while the official minimum wage is about \$370. Also, if a poor family provides nursing to a disabled family member, it receives about US\$350, which is almost equal to the minimum wage (Özgür 2014).

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



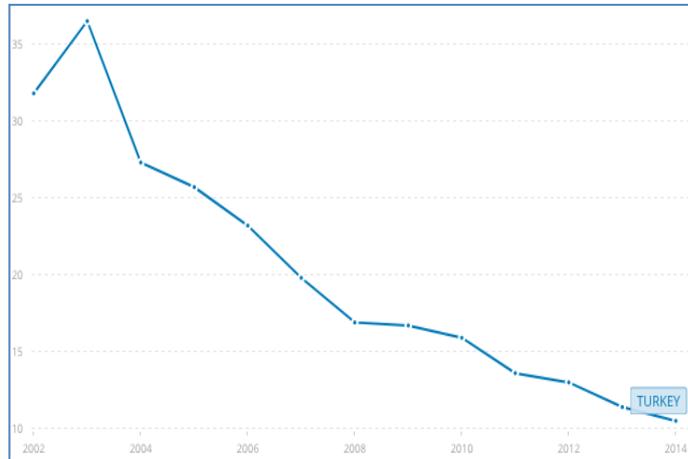
Source: T.C. Aile ve Sosyal Politikalar Bakanlığı (2014, 80; 2016, 51)

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 decreased (urban and rural) poverty in 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 in the living standards of low-income groups. This has contributed to the AKP's hegemony in the poor neighborhoods and villages.

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

In 2015, Turkey made 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 Bakanlığı 2017). Small and medium-sized farms dominate hazelnut production. Although family labor is intensively used, picking of hazelnut during summer months generally require the employment of a significant number of wage labor supplied by the Kurdish seasonal workers coming from the southeastern part of Turkey. Since the opposition parties, critical journalists and scholars have continuously claimed that government policies harm hazelnut production and small producers' interests (CHP 2016; İnce 2012), AKP's consistently strong electoral performance in Ordu is a puzzle deserving careful attention. Investigation of the interplay of small and medium farmers, farm workers, capital (hazelnut traders/exporters and Turkish and foreign agribusinesses purchasing hazelnut for the production of chocolate and other products), and the AKP government is necessary to solve this puzzle.

Table 2. 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 takes place on two main levels. On the first level, farmers and capital struggle over the market price of hazelnut. Farmers demand prices significantly higher than what traders/exporters/corporations prefer to give. The Union of Hazelnut Sales Cooperatives (*Fındık Tarım Satış Kooperatifleri Birliği*, often called as *Fiskobirlik*), founded in 1935, is a quasi-public entity. On the one hand, it represents all hazelnut producers and takes membership fees from them. On the other hand, it has acted as a government institution to regulate the hazelnut market. From the mid-1960s to the mid-2000s, Fiskobirlik purchased hazelnut from its member cooperatives on behalf of the government treasury at pre-determined prices. Fiskobirlik has also processed hazelnut by its factories and marketed it in the national and international markets through its trading branches and stores (Fiskobirlik 2017). On the other hand, private capital – Turkish and foreign agribusinesses- have been important players in the hazelnut sector. Fiskobirlik and government agencies have taken agribusiness interests into account when setting purchase prices. However, capitalist interests have not unilaterally determined the hazelnut prices due to the farmers' significant bargaining power. Political concerns have been historically important in price determinations. During the 1960s and 1970s, the peak of social movements and radical left in Turkey, hazelnut producers organized many meetings and demonstrations. Like the rest of the country, radical left was harshly suppressed after the military coup of 1980. Hence, there is a notable rupture/discontinuity with regard to the radical left organization in the region. Price issue has also been a central theme of political party competition in the region. With the exception of the 1980-82 period during which political parties were banned, electoral competition has been lively and hazelnut price has 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 average farm size is small, there has been a significant need for outside labor for picking up hazelnut

during summer months. The great majority of farm workers come from the Kurdish-majority 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 and social protection. As a result of the long history and increasing intensity of the Kurdish question, – the conflict between the Kurdish insurgents and Turkish army has continued since 1984-, class antagonism between Turkish farmers and Kurdish proletariat has 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.⁴ Given the significant weakening of the radical left – the only force which could act against chauvinism among the Turkish farmers- after 1980, the ethnic dimension of agrarian labor relations has continuously pushed the politics of Turkish farmers towards a right-wing nationalist direction. During our recent fieldwork in Ordu, farmers told us that they support the government due to its serious struggle against the PKK. They also expressed their sympathy towards the Turkish government’s anti-imperialist discourse against the Western powers. Farmers also like the government’s emphasis on the need to decrease Turkey’s dependency on the Western countries for the supply of military equipment through boosting national armaments production. AKP’s hegemony in rural Turkey should be contextualized within these two terrains of class conflict in Ordu.

Like other parts of Turkish countryside, economic crises and the neoliberal assault between 1999 and 2001 prepared the AKP’s first election victory in Ordu in 2002. Nevertheless, soon after the election, farmers started to think that the government tends to serve the interests of the hazelnut traders/exporters. Cüneyd Zapsu, a hazelnut exporter, was at the personal target of farmers’ criticism. Zapsu was not a parliamentarian but nevertheless became an advisor of the then prime minister Tayyip Erdoğan due to his foreign business networks. 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 profit of his export company. Some hazelnut exporters publicly admitted that might be the case (Cumhuriyet 2003a). Major opposition parties openly voiced this dissatisfaction and blamed the government for betrayal of hazelnut producers (Cumhuriyet 2003c, 2003g). More importantly, AKP did not have control over the top management of Fiskobirlik at that time. Fiskobirlik executives openly criticized the government for low prices and held meetings with the leaders and representatives of major opposition parties reported in the media (Cumhuriyet 2003e, 2003h). Fiskobirlik also struggled with serious financial difficulties at the time. Fiskobirlik management requested government help/guarantee for its credit applications to public and private banks but the government refused. As a result, Fiskobirlik frequently delayed its payments to farmers for the past purchases. The public perceived it as the AKP’s punishment of Fiskobirlik for its refusal to side with it (Ekşi 2006; Karpat 2006).

Farmer dissatisfaction also deeply impacted the government party. At that time the scope of criticism within the AKP was far greater than today. Several AKP officials heavily criticized Zapsu. In a meeting of the executive committee of AKP founders, Ordu deputy Enver Yılmaz said 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 export deals with foreign companies in advance, pressuring the Fiskobirlik management and government officials to set a low price, and causing huge losses for the producers and state treasury. Canikli also blamed Ali Babacan, then the Minister of State in charge of Economy, for accepting Zapsu’s wishes, and warned him that he was risking to be put on trial at a supreme court in the future 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).⁵

⁴ Among a large number of examples see CNN Türk 2016; *Hürriyet* 2017.

⁵ The relationship between Canikli and Erdoğan ameliorated later on. Canikli is the current Minister of National Defense of Turkey.

These developments put serious obstacles to AKP's attempts to expand its mass base in the region. Its share of popular vote slightly decreased, 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 have continued in the next few years and finally culminated in 2006. In that year, AKP government first refused to set a price and left the power of price setting entirely to the authority of hazelnut exporters. For the first time in the history of Turkish republic, hazelnut harvest season started without the government's declaration of a minimum procurement price (Cumhuriyet 2006f). This decreased the market price by about a half. Ordinary farmers, Fiskobirlik, Board of Agriculture, Farmers' Union, and opposition parties protested that move (2006c, 2006h). Growing farmer dissatisfaction led to a series of protests. On July 9, 2006, farmers protested 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 and said that "Go and ask the Fiskobirlik management. Government did not buy your hazelnut, they did. Do not politicize this issue" (Cumhuriyet 2006a). The volcano finally erupted on July 31. About 100,000 hazelnut producers coming from different parts of the Eastern Black Sea region gathered in a protest meeting in Ordu. After the meeting, protestors blocked the Ordu-Samsun highway for about eight hours and then 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 protest of modern Turkish history. Shocked by the magnitude of the protest, Tayyip Erdoğan labelled the protestors as "anarchists" (Cumhuriyet 2006 November 14). The public soon learned that AKP parliamentarians from Ordu called the local police chief and requested him to disperse the protestors immediately but were refused. Tayyip Erdoğan blamed the local police chief and gendarmerie commander for acting too lenient 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 executive committee of the AKP's local branch in the Perşembe district of Ordu resigned (Cumhuriyet 2006 September 7). Three days after, 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 2006i). On September 19, 2006, farmers protesting low prices physically attacked AKP's Ordu parliamentarian Eyüp Fatsa in a local festival in the Gürgentepe district of Ordu (Cumhuriyet 2006j). Fatsa, who was saved by the gendarmerie forces, claimed that protestors were members of illegal/terrorist organizations. However, one arrested protestor was found to be an AKP member and another the son of a local farmer (Cumhuriyet 2006k, 2006l). Farmers protested before and during the opening ceremony of the Black Sea Highway in April 2007 (Cumhuriyet 2007a, 2007b).

Although the great majority of protesting farmers of the region did not turn their face to the radical left, we should not neglect the radical left's organizational efforts in the region. The Union of Hazelnut Producers (*Fındık Üreticileri Sendikası, Fındık-Sen*) was founded in 2004 and has put considerable effort in organizing small farmers and participated in farmer protests (Fındık-Sen 2017). Some socialist organizations such as the Freedom and Solidarity Party (*Özgürlük ve Dayanışma Partisi, ÖDP*), People's Houses (*Halkevleri*), Socialist Democracy Party (Socialist Democracy Party, SDP), and the Communist Party of Turkey (*Türkiye Komünist Partisi, TKP*) have worked in the region. ÖDP organized a march of hazelnut producers from Trabzon to Ankara in summer 2006 (Cumhuriyet 2006b, 2006m). However, these efforts have not been very effective for three main reasons. First, the politics of radical left in Turkey has not recovered from the twin shocks (of military coup of 1980 and the collapse of the Eastern Bloc in 1989-91) yet. Second, significant ethnic division of labor in the region (between Turkish farmers and the Kurdish farm workers they employ) shifted the politics further towards the nationalist right. Finally, 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 weakness, the local members of socialist organizations were the primary targets of police arrests following the July 31 mass protest (Cumhuriyet 2006g).

Farmer protests demonstrated that AKP's prospects are not promising in the region unless there is a significant change in its hazelnut policy. This was an alarming signal before the general election on July 22, 2007. Political polarization between Islamists and secularists increased before the election. Abdullah Gül, then the second most important figure of the AKP after Erdoğan, was put as the presidential candidate of the party. The AKP had enough seats in the parliament to get him elected. 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 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, desirably by increasing its vote share, to cut the Gordian knot.

At this turning point came the AKP's populist turn in hazelnut policy. During the first half of 2007, the government completed all delayed payments to farmers (for crop procurement and compensation of the losses caused by natural calamities such as drought and frost). Moreover, the payments for 2007 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 hazelnut compared to the last year's price. 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, AKP took 55.8% of the votes in July 2007. This was a one-third increase of its vote share compared to the 2002 election. AKP's vote share in Ordu has not decreased since then.

Before 2007, AKP government created financial difficulties for the Fiskobirlik management, which threatened the financial solvency and existence of the union. After the electoral victory of 2007, the Fiskobirlik management did not have much choice but to surrender to the AKP. AKP swiftly took control of Fiskobirlik (Yıldırım 2007). Given the historical importance of Fiskobirlik in the hazelnut sector, AKP's capture of it was a decisive victory and helped the party to further its hegemony in the region. Over the years the government has turned Fiskobirlik into a branch of the Soil Products Office (Toprak Mahsulleri Ofisi, TMO), a government institution, which has increased the government control over it. In our field work 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 told us that AKP government does not have any responsibility for the decline of Fiskobirlik. They think that Fiskobirlik was haunted by corruption and factionalism and lost its functions over time. This discourse is strikingly similar to the pro-privatization discourse since the 1980s, which claimed that government-run enterprises had become inefficient and corrupt. On the question of Fiskobirlik, AKP seems to have succeeded to convince the farmers with a similar discourse. Farmers also told us that almost every rural household has one retired person receiving pension and children having non-farm employment. Since the Turkish economy has not faced an economic crisis comparable to those in 1999 and 2002 and keeps growing, the locals do not feel huge economic pressure. Of course, there is no guarantee that this will continue forever. A future economic downturn can change popular perception regarding the government performance.

In short, the AKP's significant support among the hazelnut farmers in Ordu has four main reasons. Firstly, economic crises and 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 the mainstream politics, which has favored the AKP. Secondly, farmer protests that peaked in July 2006 as well as the relatively unsuccessful electoral performance in 2004 helped the AKP leadership to realize that a strict neoliberal policy would not work for the party. The intense political polarization in Turkey has required the expansion of the electoral support as much as possible. To this end, AKP has expanded agricultural support especially before elections. This has consistently been the case in every election since 2007. Thirdly, AKP has significantly expanded social assistance to prevent the radicalization of the poor and proletarianizing villagers and mobilize their support during elections. Finally, the organizational weakness as well as the state suppression of the radical left and alternative

farmer organizations have helped the AKP to consolidate its hegemony in rural Eastern Black Sea region.

5 AKP's hegemony over the proletarianized villagers of the Soma basin

On May 13, 2014, Soma district of the city of Manisa (located in the Interior Aegean Region) witnessed the deadliest mine accident of Turkish history (and one of the deadliest of the world history). The heavy casualty of the accident once again revealed that coal mines in Turkey lack basic safety precautions. Turkey has undergone a coal production boom in recent years. Among several reasons, one reason is the increasing demand due to the expansion of coal assistance to low-income families that we have 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 happened in a mine owned by the Soma Coal Enterprises (*Soma Kömür İşletmeleri*), one of the largest private mine companies of the country. The company has one of the top-quality private coal mines of the country. Company management and engineers were all aware that there was a significant accident risk due to the extreme intensity of production. However, instead of reducing production, the managers chose to keep things going to meet the high market demand and boost their profits. The government supervisors did not push the company to take security seriously. Hence, the death of 301 miners was not really an accident but an event everybody expected but turned a blind eye on and hoped not to happen soon (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, Kınık district of İzmir city, and Savaştepe district of Balıkesir city (Çelik 2017, 797). Small-scale tobacco production was the main income source for the rural households of the Soma basin until the early 2000s. As mentioned before, the Tobacco Law of 2001 reduced the cultivation area of and state support to tobacco production. AKP government has not changed this law and continued the neoliberal tobacco policy of the previous government. As a result, the number of tobacco producers in Turkey dropped from 405.882 in 2002 to 56.000 in 2015 (Tütün Ekserleri 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 and 7000 of them were working in the mines of the Soma Coal Enterprises (Çelik 2017, 786). In short, previous tobacco farmers have become miners.⁶

Interestingly enough, despite the decline of tobacco farming and insecure working conditions in the mines, AKP's vote share has not decreased in Soma. As Table 3 shows, AKP's vote share has been almost identical in three local elections but significantly fluctuated in general elections. However, with the exception of June 2015, AKP has performed significantly better in every election compared to 2002. Of course, people make voting decisions as a result of a complex amalgam of various different factors. For instance, AKP's vote increased by nearly 10% within only five months (from June to November 2015) in Soma and Turkey in general. It is well-known that the break of the peace process with the PKK and restart of the war, and the AKP's effective propaganda – that since no party other than itself is able to get 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 behind this success. However, it is also clear that decline of tobacco farming and poor working conditions did not become factors significant enough to decrease the AKP's regional power. Also, the wave of anti-government protests after the death of 301 miners – to which miners and their families heavily participated- ebbed quickly and did not change the political landscape in Soma.

⁶ 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.

Table 3. 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

Two factors seem worthy of note to understand this outcome. Firstly, proletarianization has decreased the livelihood security of small-scale tobacco farming but increased the household income in the region. For the local people, leaving their villages and settling in Soma town has meant acquiring the ability of getting a credit card from a bank, which allows them to cover the cost of marriage and other essential needs. Families are more willing to accept the marriage of their daughters with miners than with farmers due to this reason. Several mines managed by the Soma Coal Enterprises were closed after the mine accident. As a result, 2831 miners lost their jobs. This meant the loss of income for about 10.000 people, approximately 10% of the population of Soma (Arslan 2015; Çelik 2017, 786). Although the incident clearly showed that working conditions are very insecure in the mines and miners were guaranteed to receive unemployment wage for several months, the miners who lost their jobs protested this decision and demanded the immediate reopening of the mines (*Milliyet* 2014).

Secondly, as elsewhere, AKP has used social policy as an effective tool in the region. Free healthcare and education and in-cash and in-kind transfers to low-income groups have played a role. Social assistance played a particularly important role in the containment of political risks associated with the mine accident. Ten days after the incident and mass protests, government and protestor representatives signed an agreement that includes a long list of promises. The protest wave declined after the agreement (*Milliyet* 2015). Some of the items on the list were put into practice. Four months after the accident, the government passed a law providing one public sector job to each family who lost a member in the accident.⁷ The Turkish Mass Housing Administration (*Toplu Konut İdaresi*, TOKİ) gave two houses to each family who lost a member in the accident. TOKİ has subcontracted the construction of these houses to the private sector (*Milliyet* 2016), making this a typical case of social neoliberalism. Central government and municipal administration (run by the AKP) have provided significant in-cash and in-kind assistance to these families. With these significant provisions, political risks have been contained.

Interestingly enough, social assistance has been effective to contain even the most rebellious sections of the 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 died in accident founded the association. The family participated in the protests against the AKP government's collaboration with mine owners and neglect of security in the mines. They also participated in the Social Rights Association (*Sosyal Haklar Derneği*, SHD), a leftist association for the defense of the social rights of the workers and oppressed. After three years of struggle, the family left the SHD for the reason that it does not collect donations from the public and failed to bring tangible material

⁷ Following this law, families of workers died in mine accidents in other places (such as Zonguldak) demanded the expansion of the coverage of this measure to the entire country (*Milliyet* 2017). In February 2018, the government accepted this demand and announced a new draft law, which is going 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.

benefits to the families. The family has then founded the Soma 301 Miners Social and Solidarity Association. About twenty other families with members died in the mine accident joined the association. The municipal administration controlled by the AKP helped the new association to find an office and the district administration provided the office furniture and equipment for free. The local branch of the Directorate of Religious Affairs covers the cost of the dinner served in the opening ceremony.⁸

6. In lieu of conclusion: What is to be done?

Our study has four main conclusions. Firstly, since the center-left and center-right parties lost much of their credibility during the 1990s and two severe economic crises and a harsh neoliberal assault took place during the DSP-MHP-ANAP coalition period (1999-2002), a large part of the small farmers and proletarianizing villagers has not associated the AKP with the unpopular neoliberal policies. Secondly, as our case studies of Ordu and Soma clearly show, rural masses have not been entirely silent in these years. They have used both protests – sometimes massive and aggressive ones- and the ballot box as mechanisms of negotiation with the government. Thirdly, although the AKP has not shifted away from neoliberal agricultural policy, it has selectively used the agricultural support mechanism to maintain its support among the small farmers. More importantly, by expanding the coverage and quantity of in-cash and in-kind social assistance to low-income groups, AKP has sustained its support among the poor and proletarianizing villagers. These practices have helped the AKP to maintain a relatively positive perception among the rural masses. Finally, AKP government has continuously suppressed the radical farmer organizations and socialist organizations in order to prevent the emergence of an emancipatory rural politics against its authoritarian populism.

Although this study has generally drawn a bleak picture regarding the rural politics in contemporary Turkey, we do not intend to disseminate pessimism, which has been prevalent among the left in contemporary Turkey. The environmental struggle against the new mining and hydroelectric station projects waged by small farmers and the activists working across the urban-rural spectrum have been persistent and led to the cancellation of many projects during the AKP period. Also, this paper shows that rural masses have not been entirely passive and managed to win tangible material concessions from the AKP. Hence, the struggle goes on and as long as it continues, there is always room for a healthy dose of optimism.

On the other hand, it is clear that the great majority of rural protestors has continuously supported the AKP and the left has remained weak and marginal. There is no magical formula to solve this political problem in Turkey and the rest of the world, which has witnessed the rise of far-right politics of various sorts. Hence, we hereby restrict ourselves to emphasizing several key points. First, the left should stop reading the agrarian change in the AKP period simply as a process of de-agrarianization and impoverishment of the peasantry. As we have seen, the process has been much more complex than this simplistic picture. Although the world economic crisis negatively impacted Turkey (especially in 2008-09), Turkey has *not* witnessed an economic crisis comparable to those in 1999 and 2002. In fact, per income has grown by 8% since 2002. Moreover, as we have shown, rural masses have received a significant degree of material concessions from the AKP. In short, people are *not* acting entirely irrationally and they do *not* support the AKP despite their impoverishment. Also, as the world economy has not recovered from crisis, it is impossible to rule out the possibility of an economic crisis in Turkey like 1999 and 2001.

Of course, the last crisis brought the AKP to power and there is absolutely no room to expect that a future crisis would empower a progressive alternative. However, the progressive forces should prepare for the crisis by organizing campaigns voicing the burning economic problems and demanding greater agricultural support expenditure, jobs, stronger social protection, etc. Short-term campaigns by a handful of organizations will not work. We need a large-scale and united effort to put the economic problems and demands to the forefront of politics; which is the only potentially effective act to break

⁸ We thank Coşku Çelik very much for sharing with us this valuable information she gathered during her fieldwork in Soma.

authoritarian right-wing hegemony over the lower classes. As we have shown above, social assistance has worked to contain even the most rebellious sections among the lower classes. The government controls enormous economic sources and no political force, even the CHP – strongest mainstream party in Turkey- can compete with it in the area of social assistance. Hence, progressive forces cannot (and should not) engage with such competition, which they cannot win. However, they should take this issue very seriously and establish mechanisms of material/economic solidarity as a backbone of their efforts of – united- political organization and campaign.

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