

HABILITATION THESIS

Ayan Musil, Pelin (2022). *The Transformation of Kurdish and Islamist parties in Turkey: Consequences for Regime Change*. Springer Nature.

Executive Summary:

This thesis, published in 2022 as a book through Springer, analyzes the transformation of ethnic and religious political parties in Turkey with special focus on their role in the country's democratization and regime changes. Turkey went through a process of autocratization under the rule of the AKP government over the last two decades. Scholars question the structural, agent-centered and cultural factors that led the country on this path, and provide the lessons learnt from this case for other cases of democratic decline or breakdown. This book contributes to this debate. It treats the three national elections (2002, 2007, 2015-June) as opportunities for democratization, in which the Islamist-successor AKP (in 2002, 2007) and the Kurdish-successor HDP (in 2015-June) managed to overcome identity politics and received the organized support from social groups outside of their traditional constituency. This book argues that in a semi-democratic context where repressive acts of the state (e.g. banning of parties, arresting politicians) have been subject to widespread public criticism, confronting the state becomes a salient issue. When these parties manage to frame this issue as one of democracy, they take ownership of it, and this then becomes an opportunity for democratizing the regime. This opportunity, yet, can be missed if the party follows an office-seeking strategy rather than a policy-seeking one.

Abstract:

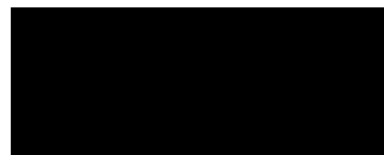
Turkey has recently experienced a regime change under the rule of the AKP government toward competitive authoritarianism. Much has changed within a period of less than two decades. Scholars now question the structural, institutional, agential and discursive dynamics that took the country to this path. The proposed book aims to contribute to this debate. Yet, rather than focusing on the longitudinal process of regime change within these two decades as some existing research did, I take a retrospective approach and re-analyze the three national elections (2002, 2007 and 2015) where the religious and ethnic parties thrived in Turkey. I question how they managed to succeed in elections (the AKP in 2002 and 2007 and the HDP in June 2015) keeping in mind that the country took an authoritarian turn afterward. These elections were providing significant opportunities for democratization of the Turkish regime: An Islamist-successor party (in 2002 and 2007) and a Kurdish-successor party (in 2015) reached record-high vote percentages while challenging the authoritarian-leaning state establishment in Turkey. How was this possible considering both the Kurdish and Islamist parties were once the anti-system parties of Turkey, especially in the 1990s when they were both subjects of dissolution? I draw the attention to comparatively analyzing these particular elections and the coalitions that these parties managed to build outside of their traditional constituencies. How did they manage to receive the organized support of certain social groups prior to these elections? What kind of political contexts allowed

these parties to appeal to these groups? What were the motivations of these parties at that stage and how did these motivations affect the regime change?

The novelty of this book lies in the comparative approach that it takes in understanding why the successor religious and ethnic parties were successful as well as its retrospective focus on these particular elections. The AKP's electoral success was questioned several times by scholars at a time when the authoritarian turn in Turkey had not yet taken place. Following the authoritarian turn, the main questions focused on why and how the regime changed in this direction. But, asking the question of electoral success retrospectively in the aftermath of an authoritarian turn can shed light on why the opportunities for democratization failed: What were the problems of such opportunity structures that gave rise to these parties in the first place?

In this book, I adopt a process-tracing approach, merging three different theories to build a causal mechanism that sheds light on how the Kurdish and Islamist parties were able to align with organized groups outside of their constituency. My main argument is that in a semi-democratic context where the repressive acts of the state such as banning parties or arresting politicians have been subject to a considerable degree of public criticism; 'confronting the state' becomes a salient issue during the elections. When these parties, as the main subjects of repression, manage to frame this salient issue as 'an issue of democracy,' they become the owners of the issue and receive organized support from social groups outside of their constituency. While a party's ownership of the issue of democracy is a potential force for democratizing the regime, democratization is yet conditional on the motivation of the party: If the issue ownership is a consequence of an office-seeking behavior rather than a policy-seeking one, it is less likely to end up with democratization.

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Signature: Dr. Pelin (Ayan) Musil