

Political clientelism and democracy in Turkey

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Abstract Political clientelism refers to a socio-political structure and set of relations formed by the reciprocal and personal exchange acts that the patrons of political positions can use for the clients in exchange for votes or political support. While this kind of political bond can encourage democratic development, it can also produce detrimental effects on democracy if the phenomenon becomes widespread. This study will examine the basic studies in the field of political clientelism and emphasize some basic features underlined by the concept. Some aspects of these key features reveal the tense relationship between political clientelism and democracy. As a particular and informal form of participation, political clientelism exist in a tense relationship with certain dimensions of democracy in terms of the open public debate and inclusion. This tense relationship between democracy and political clientelism constitutes one other fundamental dimension underlined by studies of clientelism. Another aim of the presented study is to touch upon the development process of clientelistic politics in Turkey and examine its connection with democracy. Studies of political clientelism in Turkey emphasize that there is a transition from traditional patronage to party-based broker clientelism. Political clientelism increasingly dominated by urban dynamics in the multi-party era (1946–2002) becomes the fundamental form of interaction between the party and the electorate. In the period of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has been in power from 2002 to the present, political clientelism has become extraordinarily widespread, triggering political polarization and ultimately bringing along a great decline in terms of democratic competition and accountability.

Keywords Political clientelism · Patronage · Turkey · AKP · Democracy

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Politischer Klientelismus und Demokratie in der Türkei

Zusammenfassung Politischer Klientelismus bezieht sich auf eine sozio-politische Struktur und ein Beziehungsgeflecht, das sich aus gegenseitigen und persönlichen Tauschgeschäften zusammensetzt, die die Inhaber politischer Ämter für ihre Klienten im Gegenzug für Stimmen oder politische Unterstützung nutzen können. Diese Art von politischer Bindung kann die demokratische Entwicklung fördern, sie kann aber auch negative Auswirkungen auf die Demokratie haben, wenn das Phänomen weit verbreitet ist. In dieser Studie werden die grundlegenden Studien auf dem Gebiet des politischen Klientelismus untersucht und einige grundlegende Merkmale des Konzepts hervorgehoben. Einige Aspekte dieser Hauptmerkmale machen das Spannungsverhältnis zwischen politischem Klientelismus und Demokratie deutlich. Als eine besondere und informelle Form der Partizipation steht der politische Klientelismus in einem Spannungsverhältnis zu bestimmten Dimensionen der Demokratie in Bezug auf die offene öffentliche Debatte und die Einbeziehung. Dieses Spannungsverhältnis zwischen Demokratie und politischem Klientelismus stellt eine weitere grundlegende Dimension dar, die in Studien zum Klientelismus hervorgehoben wird. Ein weiteres Ziel der vorliegenden Studie ist es, den Entwicklungsprozess der klientelistischen Politik in der Türkei zu beleuchten und ihre Verbindung zur Demokratie zu untersuchen. Studien zum politischen Klientelismus in der Türkei betonen, dass es einen Übergang vom traditionellen Klientelismus zum parteibasierten Maklerklientelismus gibt. Der politische Klientelismus, der in der Ära der Mehrparteienparteien (1946–2002) zunehmend von der städtischen Dynamik dominiert wurde, wird zur grundlegenden Form der Interaktion zwischen der Partei und der Wählerschaft. In der Ära der Partei für Gerechtigkeit und Entwicklung (AKP), die von 2002 bis heute an der Macht ist, hat sich der politische Klientelismus außerordentlich stark ausgebreitet, was zu einer politischen Polarisierung geführt hat und letztlich einen starken Rückgang des demokratischen Wettbewerbs und der Rechenschaftspflicht mit sich brachte.

Schlüsselwörter Politischer Klientelismus · Patronage · Türkei · AKP · Demokratie

1 Introduction

Political clientelism indicates an informal, personal, and asymmetrical network of relationships in many different countries established simultaneously with the political modernization process among political parties, elites, and voters. Unlike traditional clientelism or patronage, modern clientelism studies consider party-based broker-clientelism as a product of the electoral democratization process. However, the relationship of clientelistic politics with democracy or democratization has also been subjugated to significant criticisms in many studies. Problems including the lack of development of equal and autonomous citizenship, partisan-based-resource-distribution, and the erosion of democratic competition have been considered as the main results produced by clientelistic politics. In this article, along with the general

conceptual discussion to be elucidated about clientelism, an evaluation will be undertaken based on the results of clientelism studies conducted in Turkey. Especially clientelist politics that took new forms during the period of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey should be discussed and the relationship of these new forms with democracy or democratization should be questioned. Accordingly, in the first sections of the study, some basic features of clientelistic politics will be touched upon and its connection with democracy or democratization will be emphasized. From this point of view, in the following sections some basic formation and developmental characteristics of clientelistic politics in Turkey will be revealed and the new forms assumed during the AKP period will be focused on. Here, the relationship between the spread of clientelistic politics and the transformation of the party system towards the dominant party system will be examined and its possible consequences for democracy will be discussed.

2 Clientelism

Clientelism came to the fore after World War II through studies of Western researchers in different disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and political science as a phenomenon they observed as a result of field studies concentrated in regions and non-Western societies, where traditional social structure was a dominant form of social organization. The research was mostly concentrated on developing countries by following the dominant modernization theory of the period, and the term was seen as a phenomenon that would disappear with the spread of modernization. Given the aforementioned framework, this issue has been handled as a phenomenon peculiar to societies that have not experienced western modernization for a long time and as a product of the change that the traditional structures dominating these societies have been exposed to with the modernization process. Although this basic point of view is partially correct, recent studies show that patron-client relations can develop in different forms and intensities in all modernizing societies (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984; Kuo 2018; Piattoni 2012a; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007).

In the early stage, the concepts of patronage or clientelism were used mostly by political anthropologists and sociologists as a form of organization that dominates social relations in traditional societies and rural contexts (Boissevain 1966, 1969; Scott 1972; Weingrod 1968).¹ These concepts point out patron-client relations and networks' development based on the unequal distribution and control of certain resources (land, goods, services) within the traditional social structure. In this power network, the patron refers to a position that owns, controls, and thus offers resources, while the client has a more dependent position that needs the support and assistance of the patron to have access to these scarce resources (Boissevain 1966, p. 379). While the unequal distribution of resources causes an asymmetrical relationship between both actors on a personal basis, its operation is based on mutual exchange. For example, Boissevain describes the patronage relationship as follows. "Patronage is founded on the reciprocal relations between patrons and clients. By

¹ For different uses of the two terms, see Piattoni 2012b and Hilgers 2012: 163–168.

boss, I mean a person who uses his influence to assist and protect some other person, who then becomes his “client”, and in return provides certain services to his boss. The relationship is asymmetrical, for the nature of the services exchanged may differ considerably. Patronage is thus the complex of relations between those who use their influence, social position or some other attribute to assist and protect others, and those whom they so help and protect” (Boissevain 1966, p. 18). This unequal exchange relationship is established through the provision of a variety of protection, services, and benefits, provided that the higher status person (patron) provides certain help and support to a lower status person (client) using resources and influence, which can be quite varied and variable. The client who enters such an exchange relationship is not able to fully respond to the assistance or service provided, and henceforth becomes bound to the patron with a sense of obligation. The more the distribution of resources between the patron and client becomes uneven, the more intense the exchange relationship based on this gets, and the higher the client’s loyalty and obedience to the boss transforms. “The degree of compliance a client gives his boss is a direct function of the degree of imbalance in the exchange relationship-of how dependent the client is on his patron’s services” (Scott 1972, p. 94). In addition, since the patronage or clientelistic relationship is essentially a face-to-face, informal and personal bilateral relationship, it involves mutual trust and positive emotions between the actors and connects the actors through different forms of diffuse relations and exchanges. Patron-client relationships can create a dyadic relationship structure as well as a pyramidal wide network structure (Scott 1972, p. 94).

Patron-client relations, which appear in the interpersonal local context of traditional social structures (such as the relationship between the landlord and the farmer or the peasants), are flexibly becoming a fundamental part of the “modern” modes of organization and integration with the spread of the modernization process. Patronage or clientelism henceforth also refers to a complex mutual interaction process of organization and integration of traditional and national modern power structures and relations from the local context to the national level. Eisenstadt and Roniger (1984) refer to the patron-client relations expanding from the local context to the national level, through the examples of Southern Europe as follows: “With the process of national integration, individual localized patron-client attachment evolved into more complex networks linked to wider institutional frameworks such as or parties bureaucracies ... Relations were then more instrumental and impersonal and less dependent on ideology prescriptions of solidarity than in traditional settings. Connections with ruling parties and state bureaucracies, office holding, and central marketing processes become connected—for instance in Greece and Spain—with the emergence of clientelistic networks ... From dyadic and localized to more complex pyramidal networks” (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984, p. 52).

Patron-client relations become a central mode, network, and process of integration of the social and institutional structures of national modernization that are distinct from (but may be intertwined, juxtaposed, and conflicted with) both the local ascriptive community and modern class organization (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984; Scott 1972; Lemarchand and Legg 1972). Patron-client relations, which expanded from the local to the national, diversified in terms of actors and resources, and were exposed to significant changes in the structure and functioning of the network. The

clientelistic relationship and exchange have begun to become a fundamental part of the institutional integration strategy of the state bureaucracy, political parties, and market actors, which are organized at the national level and where power resources are concentrated. The transfer and flow of resources, which are the basic conditions for establishing a clientelistic relationship, begin to be regulated through these modern institutions, where resources are diversified (job, money, credit, scholarship, permits, public services, etc.) and become an important tool of political struggle and support networks. While the democratization process that accompanies national modernization intensifies the interaction of the state and society, it tightly connects the political parties that develop as the main institution of political representation to individual and social interests and demands. Thus, it can be argued that new political clientelistic relations and ties that are concentrated around the state, political parties, and voters, whose urban basis predominates, have begun to form.² The “patron”, who is a part of the patron-client bond, turns into a political intermediary (i.e., brokers) within or through the bureaucracy and political parties. With the democratization process, in some cases traditional patrons turn into party brokers, or party organizations create or include party brokers within themselves. Through their positions in the institutional networks in which the power and resource flows are concentrated, the patrons or brokers collect and organize indirect or direct resources (or both) in this way and distributes them to gain political support and creates vertical, personal and informal networks. The increase in the bureaucratic distribution of resources and electoral political institutions and positions reveals the formation of electoral networks in which party-centered brokers predominate. In this process, the client’s position changes in the face of the diversifying resources and political actors of the urban and more or less democratic environment. The exchange relationship intensifies between the clients who have the right to vote and the brokers who need votes for political power and regulates the distribution of resources. Thus, the client’s position in the exchange relationship changes with the increase of social mobility, party diversity and competition, and electoral positions, as well as with the spread of voting rights, and begins to develop a more flexible and variable interdependence with the brokers. Thus, in addition to a rural-based traditional clientelistic relationship, the urban-based new modern “political clientelism” began to become widespread (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984; Scott 1972; Lemarchand and Legg 1972; Roniger 2004, Çınar 2016).

While early-period clientelism studies mostly reveal a historical development line as briefly described above regarding developing countries, recent studies also included western European contexts in the analysis in a comparative way. These studies have focused on political networks that are kept together and functioning through mutual clientelistic distribution and exchange relations among the state bureaucracy, parties, and voters, especially as one of the important results of democratization (Brun and Diamond 2014; Stokes et al. 2013; Szwarcberg 2015; Auyero 2001; Kuo 2018). These networks point out personal, informal, and particularistic exchange

² Since clientelism is basically a social power relationship that binds the parties to each other through various unequal resource exchanges, such relationships tend to transform or transform into a political relationship that operates within modern political institutions around the patron and client.

relations that are invisible at first glance behind or inside political institutions (such as bureaucracy, and political parties) that operate according to the rules of law and democratic norms. At one end of this vertical network of relationships established between patron/broker and client, there are clients with high financial dependency. At the other end, there are patrons or brokers who offer them various financial aid, goods, and services in exchange for their votes and electoral support. Patron, broker and client relations, which are intensified in the election processes, are based on clientelistic networks activated by the problem-solving exchanges and cultural representations that are constantly reproduced in the daily relations of local contexts (Auyero 2001, p. 22–23). Recent studies, which emphasize the increasing number of brokers in the chain of clientelistic exchange relationships formed within the modern party and bureaucratic organization, have also drawn attention to the central role of these actors, which are closest to the voters in daily life relations, in gathering information about the voters and regulating the flow of resources. “Enjoying the power that comes with their mediating function, brokers are expert manipulators of information and of people, channeling resources from their boss to their clients and votes and support from their clients to the person in control of the (material and symbolic) resources” (Auyero 2001, p. 83). Brokers have the chance to direct and determine to a certain extent the behavior of the constituencies (particularly voting and providing political support) by building exchange relations and networks that function as problem-solving and have more or less daily continuity through the channels and possibilities of access to political power sources they become. This provides them with opportunities for reward and punishment based on the semi-monopolistic use of problem-solving resources on clients. Thus, clientelistic networks of dependency can turn into a basic strategy developed by political parties and candidates competing for state office to gain the votes of large voters, connect them to the party and mobilize them to be in power and remain in power at the national or local level (Stokes et al. 2013; Auyero 2001; Elvira et al., 2019). Such dependency relations between voters and political party organizations ultimately raise the question of whether clientelism is compatible with democracy or democratic regimes. In the next section, this relationship will be the object of further analysis.

3 The Relationship between Clientelism and Democracy

As emphasized above, there has been a transition from a traditional or rural-based patronage or clientelism to a modern broker-clientelism, whose weight is developed in the urban context, through key agencies such as electoral processes, voters, and political parties, which gain importance with the democratization process (Escobar 2002). Clientelism can also be seen as an integration mechanism and relationship that operates through personal and vertical resource-exchange networks built between large constituencies located in different local contexts and formal democratic institutions at the national level (bureaucracy, political parties). When seen as such, clientelism is a dynamic, mediated, and contradictory integration process in which local power relations and actors and modern power institutions and relations that develop are interpenetrated. This socio-political integration process based on clien-

telistic resource exchange can occur in different intensities and forms in all societies, as mentioned before.³ It can be further argued that such an integration gained its main impetus through the democratization process, which is conceived as the realization of modern political democratic institutions, mechanisms, and interactions. “In the context of democratic institutional settings, clientelism thus evolves into a more symmetrical (rather than asymmetrical), intermittent (rather than stable and continuous), instrumental-rational (rather than normative) and broker-mediated (rather than face-to-face based) exchange relationship” (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007, p. 4). The democratization process creates, on the one hand, relations and ties of citizenship, which is based on general legal rules and (social) rights between the state and the individual, and produce, on the other hand, modern representative institutions (especially political parties) based on political elections and more sensitive to individual and group interests and demands. This process has led institutional actors, who are conditional on competing for various support of voters for political power, to build personal and informal clientelistic ties of exchange and networks, and thus to generate the power figuration of political clientelism in many different contexts integrated into the form of patron-client relations. Democratization has thereby created an important impetus to encourage the political participation and mobilization of voters who have the right to vote around the clientelistic strategies of political parties. Because of these dynamics, the researchers asserted a positive relationship between democracy and clientelism on the one hand, and on the other hand, they drew attention to the contradictory situation between them by emphasizing that the personal, informal, and vertical characteristics of this relationship cannot be identified with democratic citizenship. While clientelism may produce positive effects in the early stages of democratization, it has been seen as a factor that prevents the development of the quality of democracy in the later stages of the democratization process (Hilgers 2012; Blakeley 2012; Piattoni 2012b, Roniger 2004; Brun 2014, p. 1–14). In their joint comparative study, Berenschot and Aspinall (2020) draw also attention to these contradictory aspects of clientelism in terms of democracy. Particularly in some contexts, clientelistic exchange can lead to perverse accountability, above all in conditions where resource monopoly prevails, while sometimes it can lead to empowering communities and clientelistic responsiveness, especially in cases where discretionary control over state resources is fragmented (Berenschot and Aspinall 2020).

It is necessary to see clientelism as a structural relationship that affects both the emergence of the regime type and the interaction between the political elite and the electorate, with its differentiating aspects that appear in many regime types. As emphasized above, clientelistic relations can contribute to the formation of a democratic regime by strengthening the ties between political elites and voters by increasing voter participation and mobilization in a democratic institutional environment, while their basic features such as personal informality, particularity in resource flow, and

³ While modern group organizations typically occur through categorical, horizontal, or shared characteristic ties (such as ethnic or religion-based, occupational and class groupings), clientelistic grouping is more of a hybrid form of organization constructed through dyadic, personal, and vertical ties, and dynamics may differ from categorical groupings (Scott 1972, p. 97).

pushing voters into dependent citizens harm democratic representation and competition. It can also create important problems in terms of democratic accountability. In this respect, clientelistic relations have the possibility of widespread development widely in authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, and in some cases they can even constitute the main source of social support for these regimes (Cook 2014; Hilgers 2012). Since clientelism is first and foremost a non-programmatic and conditional policy of resource allocation (Stokes et al. 2013), the question of whether this policy of distribution is compatible with a democratic regime has been one of the main issues of interest to many researchers. Democracy theories generally regard elections and certain functions of political parties as indispensable elements. In particular, these two are means of representation in which the priorities and interests of the citizens are articulated. At the same time, regular elections are seen as indispensable democratic tools, in which the government performance is evaluated by the voters (accountability) and thus its change or legitimate continuity (Stokes et al., 2013, p. 246; Schröter 2011, p. 77). Normative democratic theories generally have the image of an equal and free citizen, whose freedom is only possible if the person who has autonomy, that is, does not have a material and unequal dependence on anyone, that individuals can be forced into a certain behavior, h/she can act freely. The existence of democratic debate presupposes an environment in which voters can participate in the political debate and make their own decisions without the threat of any sanction or coercive power.⁴ However, many of these democratic requirements are largely obsolete in clientelistic distributional politics (Stokes et al., 2013, p. 249).

Brun and Diamont, who see clientelism as a mechanism that harms democracy, emphasize that especially the political elites provide low-quality social citizenship services in return for political support, thus depriving the poor of their political citizenship rights (Brun and Diamont 2014, p. 11). In the most cases of Latin America, it has been emphasized that the prevalence and entrenchment of clientelistic practices pose significant obstacles to the development of democratic structures and practices by organized social groups (Escobar 2002). The existence of dire economic conditions caused large social segments and voters to exchange votes in return for certain services. In addition, the long existence of such practices created informal institutions based on unequal exchange networks and hindered the development of local participatory institutions that would form the basis of democratic citizenship (Escobar 2002, p. 20). Thus, clientelistic relations have a structure that sets limits on the exercise of civic political rights and prevents an institutional change that will help to overcome these limits. Escobar argues that democratic citizenship and clientelism are not fundamentally compatible with each other, arguing that this is so to the extent that formal political rights operate as part of a transaction rather than as a means of the political expression of votes. Since the main feature of clientelism is the exchange of political rights in return for social services and material benefits,

⁴ Brokers have the opportunity to limit their clients' rights to vote freely and engage in political activity, thanks to the tight control and supervision network they have built over voters. In their relationships with clients, brokers implicitly suggest that the support provided can only continue with success in the elections. Since providing assistance and support informally causes arbitrariness, clients who receive various assistance from patron or brokers are often ready to offer their support in different forms in elections to ensure the continuity of this support (Stokes et al. 2013; Auyero 2001, p. 83).

this is incompatible with democratic principles. Being a form of relationship that displaces social rights with the guarantee of personal distribution of state resources (selective and irrational), and as a weak form of participation, together with the systems and practices it sustains, clientelism is harmful to democratic citizenship (Escobar 2002, p. 23; Foweraker and Landman 1997, p. 16).

Considering that one of the most important reasons for the spread of clientelistic relations lies in the socio-economic conditions of the electorate, it is possible to determine the existence of an important relationship between neo-liberal policies and the spread of clientelism in the recent period. Neo-liberal policies reinforce the flexibility of labor, disorganization, and the decline of political participation and mobilization, which increases social and spatial polarization, thus necessitating the preference for individual ways to solve the survival problems encountered. In this way, clientelism is essentially kept alive by a political-economic system and operates as a mechanism that inhibits the autonomous, horizontal, and class organization of citizens (Auyero 2001, p. 167; Hilgers 2012, p. 167; Scott 1972).⁵ At the same time, it can be claimed that privatization and outsourcing practices, which gained importance in the field of public services together with neo-liberal policies, provide an environment compatible with clientelistic-style exchange relations, and thus, by working together with neo-liberal policies, a culture of dependency becomes more widespread. Roniger refers also to the contradictory relationship between citizenship and the economic system in the context of clientelism: “This duality reflects a major tension of modern democratic polities, which are built on citizenship and political equality but leave the economic domain open to inequalities and substantial socioeconomic gaps. This duality may explain the paradoxical flourishing of clientelistic networks under macroeconomic adjustment and restructuring. Liberalization, reduction of state intervention in favor of market mechanisms, privatization of state-owned and state-supported services, and curtailment of union power further fragment society and heighten the need for support networks” (Roniger 2004, p. 367).

Beyond that, the relationship between clientelism and democracy is mostly encountered in discussions around the concept of “competitive authoritarianism”. One of the main features that characterize all authoritarian competitive regimes is the existence of an unequal playing field among political actors. This unequal playing field is determined considerably through widespread clientelism and the politicization of state bureaucracies, mostly based on Latin American examples. Situations such as partisan abuse of state institutions, favoring the government party against the opposition, and systematic inhibition of the opposition’s capacity to organize and compete in elections present an unequal playing field. In addition, this unequal playing field manifests itself in terms of access to resources, media, and judiciary (Levitsky and Way 2010: 9–12). Concerning this, some researchers emphasize that clientelism conflicts with liberal representation and procedural democracy by pro-

⁵ In the case of Mexico, Fox (1994) draws attention to the importance of autonomous community organizations, especially in rural and urban areas, in providing a democratic transformation against clientelistic organization and dependency relations.

ducing a relation of dependent citizenship.⁶ Trantidis for example considers that the understanding of participatory democracy offers a more appropriate framework for the critical understanding of clientelism, and in terms of democracy discussions, dominant party systems are thought to be susceptible to authoritarian development due to the existence of formal democratic institutions and the absence of a real effective rival party, although other parties can carry out their activities. (Trantidis 2015, p. 113–114). In addition, it is emphasized that clientelism can play a key role in the transformation of democratic dominant-party systems into authoritarian regimes. In many different contexts and countries, clientelism functions as a key strategy for dominant parties in manipulating electoral processes. Except in cases where clientelistic relations are occasionally supported by the direct use of violence and repression, typical authoritarian control is usually temporary and unsystematic in character, and while dominant parties may resort to authoritarian restraints, the need for broad popular support makes them dependent on softer manipulative practices. At this point, clientelism becomes the most strategic key in maintaining and increasing the popular support of the dominant parties and in defending itself against the challenge of the opposition (Trantidis 2015, p. 115–16). “Clientelism is one of the key practices affecting the participation decisions of social actors by changing the pay-offs they derive from choices of political participation. As a result, extensive application of clientelism by the dominant party makes it more difficult for the opposition to recruit supporters and activists by raising its organizational costs to such an extent that competition with the incumbent is no longer meaningful. This gives the dominant party a degree of influence unmatched by any alternative political organization.” (Trantidis 2015, p. 118).

In similar ways, researchers examining dominant single-party systems in Mexico (Magaloni 2006; Greene 2007) have emphasized the authoritarian and autocratic tendencies in these regimes and pointed out clientelistic politics as a fundamental element of the long-term dominance of the incumbent political parties, which are in tension with the democratic regime. Hegemonic party systems or autocracies generally strive for a majority that can rule alone, and thus form strong coalitions to achieve this. Hegemonic parties are therefore oversized government coalitions that are protected through broad distribution of government support and patronage. They need an image of invincibility to avoid party splits. Another reason for majority effort is to control institutional change in their favor. The parliamentary majority is quite important for this. Rather than being instruments of violence, hegemonic party

⁶ Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007, p. 2) show that liberal democratic representation and responsible party-model approaches that dominate democracy studies mostly focus on formal relations between the party, voters or citizens based on institutional and normative basic assumptions, and informal patronage or clientelistic ties are ignored. Accordingly, clientelistic policies may harm the principle of democratic accountability. Where clientelistic relations dominate, the success of politicians is determined not by distribution policies and collective goods offerings benefited by large segments of citizens, but by an interaction in which citizens' votes are directly exchanged in return for direct payments, continued access to jobs, goods and services, and thus a form of interaction that undermines democratic will in representation. In the new democracies developing in Latin America, Post-Communist Eastern European countries, South and South-east Asia and some African countries, it is based on patronage or clientelistic party and voter interaction forms rather than the responsible party-model, which foresees a style of interaction in which parties based on consistent programmatic policies compete for electoral votes.

regimes employ electoral institutions as a means of regulating payments to their supporters and as a means of punishing opponents (elites and masses). Thus, their loyalty to the regime and their survival increase their interests (Magaloni 2006). Magaloni argues that the mass support of the hegemonic party depends on a combination of three basic elements: long-term economic growth, vote-buying and distribution of government transfers through a punitive regime or the exclusion of opposition voters and politicians from the party spoils system, and finally, electoral fraud and violence. (Magaloni 2006, p. 20) Drawing attention to the relationship between long-term incumbency and clientelism, Greene (2007) emphasized also the importance of clientelistic politics in the construction and maintenance of dominant party systems. Hyper-incumbency situations in particular offer some fundamental advantages. The most important of these is that it affects the electoral competition and helps maintain dominance. Unlike the opposition, the dominant party can spend much more than those challenging monopolistic access to public resources, can penetrate the media and feed its army of electioneers, and can appeal to voters much more widely. Most importantly, the dominant party's long term in government has the chance to reward voters with patronage goods. The dominant party thus increases the cost of defection to the opposition and imposes an opportunity cost of not joining the dominant party. In places where patronage is not enough, the pressure mechanism may come into play. (Greene 2007, p. 297). The politicization of public resources by the dominant party draws attention to the critical importance of the advantages of being in government for a long time. He makes especially an emphasis on control and monopoly over public resources that supports and expands partisanship. It is hence important that the dominant party has access to tools that change electoral competition. "I define dominant party systems as hybrids that combine meaningful electoral competition with continuous executive and legislative rule by a single party for at least 20 years or at least four consecutive elections. The key feature of dominant party systems is that elections are meaningful but manifestly unfair. Meaningful elections induce opposition actors to form parties and compete for votes. Unfair elections mean that biases in partisan competition tilt the playing field so much in the incumbent party's favor that opposition parties are extremely unlikely to win" (Greene 2007, p. 12). It is generally emphasized that although patronage is seen as important in the construction and maintenance of the authoritarian dominant party system, long-term dominance can yet disrupt the democratic electoral competition between political parties.

In the case of a hegemonic party system, the voters' dependence on the hegemonic party and its clientelistic aid and support, as well as the inability of opposition parties to make this distribution, may weaken the competitive situation in favor of the dominant party (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007, p. 32–33). Intensive implementation of clientelistic policies by the dominant party can largely eliminate the conditions of democratic competition. In the case that clientelistic policies gain weight, it can become one of the most important tools that enable the ruling party, which holds the state and public resources, to maintain this power. This situation may cause prioritization of clientelistic distribution to the voter groups supporting the ruling party, and thus exclusion of other voter groups from resource distribution and the elimination of equal citizenship conditions. The particular distribution of clientelistic

benefits to these particular partisan or close constituencies can lead to the problem of exclusion, weakening the ties of large voters to the state, and increasing the effect of cultural divisions, leading to the problem of political polarization. Competition over these informally distributed resources becomes an important issue of political competition and controversy, from voter groups to political elites. In particular, the politicized economic management structure provides the existing central or local governments with clientelistic distribution opportunities, while creating a partisan voter base that is strongly loyal to the government party. These politicized political-economic sectors and the distributions from them (public investments and tenders, credit guarantees, import or import licenses or subsidies, etc.) have a great impact here (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007, p. 35 et al.).⁷ In this respect, a significant number of researchers dealing with the relationship between clientelism and democracy argue that the basic features of democratic regimes are likely to be transformed when clientelistic politics overlap with the dominant party system. Considering the arguments put forward so far, it becomes possible to draw the following general conclusion: a democratic decline is likely to occur in environments where clientelistic exchanges are concentrated and spread across different sectors and are also monopolized by a single dominant party. Moreover, in the comparative study Berenschot and Aspinall conducted, researchers emphasized that in countries where clientelism is widespread, the tendency towards democratic decline is much higher than in countries where clientelism is weak and so they determine that clientelistic politics can be a major driver of democratic decline (Berenschot and Aspinall 2020, p. 12–13).

When we consider the basic claims made here regarding the relationship between democracy and clientelism, it is seen that there are quite obvious similarities with the characteristics of the democratic decline process detected in the last years of the AKP era in Turkey. Based on the example of Turkey and AKP, the main claim of this article is that, considering the historical prevalence of clientelistic relations, clientelistic policies overlapping with the dominant party system undermine the competitiveness and accountability aspects of democratic regimes and strengthen their authoritarian characteristics. In order to base this claim, we will first briefly focus on the historical development of clientelism in Turkey, and then touch on the clientelistic policies that became widespread during the AKP period and the authoritarian tendencies that this situation created in the nature of the semi-democratic regime.

⁷ “Conversely, under conditions of weak development, intense competition may encourage politicians to seek an extension of the government’s influence over economic resource allocation with the implicit or explicit objective to create clientelistic principal-agent ties. As already indicated, in the course of such political linkage building, politicians may reduce the competitiveness of democracy. They create associational ‘pillars’ around economic groups and political parties that reduce the size of the electoral market place and may anchor the rise of a hegemonic political party or partisan cartel. As the cases of Austria, Belgium, Italy, or Japan after World War II could show, material bonds of direct citizen-politician exchange kept partisan camps afloat long after their earlier ideological moorings had weakened.” (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007, p. 41).

4 Political Clientelism and Democracy in Turkey

Before moving on to the clientelistic policies of the AKP period and its consequences in terms of the democratic regime, it is necessary to briefly touch on the historical development patterns of political clientelism in the Turkish political system. In this context, many researchers took the development of traditional patronage or clientelistic relations back to the Ottoman period and defined it as a basic form of integration and interaction between the center (bureaucracy and state) and the periphery in this period. Especially in the 18th and early 19th centuries, the Ayans, who represented the local powers (notables) in the surrounding regions, and the Agha and Eşraf families, who were influential from the Late Ottoman to the Republican period, built patron-client networks and relationships through their control over land and trade, thus creating local bureaucratic power. They have risen to the position of important representatives of the central power in the localities. Thanks to the patronage relations they established with the local communities (especially the villagers), these local power holders (notables) have turned into an important intermediary power group between the center and the periphery (Sayarı 1977, 2014; Güneş-Ayata 1994; Meeker 2002; Mardin 1973). However, the development and spread of traditional patron-client relations should be seen in relation to bureaucratic state reforms, expanding economic market relations and democratization processes aimed at modernization throughout the 19th century. Around these developments, bureaucratic state institutions began to penetrate more intensively into local community life and subject it to strict control and regulation activities. As a result, government resources and services for community life have become increasingly accessible and desirable public goods. The increase in the state's monopolistic resources and services, access to them and competition, and the mediation towards these have contributed to the development of traditional patronage relations, which centered around the bureaucratic state and its elites, local power holders and communities rather than political parties. At the same time, the democratization process that began to develop towards the end of the 19th century means the creation of new modern institutions such as parliament and elections on the one hand and modern party organizations such as the first established and most effective party organization, Committee of Union and Progress (İttihat ve Terakki Partisi) on the other. To a limited extent, these modern representative institutions also paved slowly the way for the development of party-centered patronage. In the first instance, the nation state building and democratization process that started in the late-Ottoman period thus enabled the development of a party-centered patronage in Turkey. Sayarı (1977, p. 106) identifies this situation as follows: "The fact that notables exercised economic controls over the peasantry and acted as their 'protectors' against a powerful state gained additional political significance with the emergence of parties after the turn of the twentieth century. Although the reach of party politics and the scope of mass participation remained limited during both the Young Turk era (1908–1918) and the authoritarian one-party period (1923–1946) the influence of notables was amply felt in parliamentary politics and in party activities. Between 1908 and 1918, scores of notables entered into the parliament and assumed leadership roles in local branches of Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). As Rustow (1966, p. 117) indicates, the CUP orga-

nized its party units in the provinces by recruiting notables into its ranks through ‘systematic use of patronage and economic regulation’.”⁸ Therefore, it can be argued that the clientelism developing in Turkey corresponds more to a party-based clientelism, which is one of the dual classifications put forward by Berenschot and Aspinall (2020).⁹ Consequently, these developments show that patronage or clientelism intensified and started to spread in the context of the modernization policies and effects carried out in the late-Ottoman and Republican periods.

During the Single Party Periods dominated by the Committee of Union and Progress (1913–18) and the Republican People’s Party (1925–1946), the economic activities of the state increased and the relations between the center and the periphery became more intense. This situation has enabled the maintenance of patronage relations around state resources and services, connecting both the party and bureaucratic elites and their supporters who are included in the system, as well as the center and the local power groups in the periphery. During the CHP’s Single Party Period (1925–46), while republican-secular political institutions were tried to be built from above through reformist bureaucratic elites, the development of competitive democratic representation and election mechanisms was highly restricted. Although this orientation hindered the development of party patronage or broker clientelism shaped around elections and vote competition, the CHP administration partially included the local power groups (agha and notables) in the alliance of the new regime, which had assumed the role of intermediary between the large rural population and the central bureaucracy and party elites through their patronage networks. (Güneş-Ayata 1994; Unbehauen 2006, p. 160–192). In this context, the party’s monopoly on state resources and services has become the main means of maintaining traditional patronage relations. This situation only changed with the transition to a multi-party system after 1946, and clientelistic exchange relations and networks began to expand rapidly through the electoral policies and strategies of political parties. Under the conditions of multi-party democratic elections and competitiveness after 1950, traditional patronage relations began to evolve into modern party patronage or increasingly urban-centered broker clientelism (Sayarı 1977, p. 107; Çınar 2016).

⁸ Despite the weak influence of electoral dynamics, the importance of patronage practices in the construction of party networks is particularly evident in the efforts of the İTC to create a Turkish and Muslim national entrepreneurial class. With the monopolization of state resources in the hands of the İTC after 1913, the construction of such patronage networks became the main politics of the party leadership. Although there are many indications pointing to the development of patronage politics in this period, this issue has not been truly analyzed so far. In this respect, the politics of patronage that developed during this period awaits further research. For such policies of the İTC, see also Rustow (1966); Yalman (1997, p. 320); Pamuk (2012, p. 151–152).

⁹ In their comparative study, Berenschot and Aspinall make two basic classifications of patronage democracy: *Party- and community-based patronage democracies*. “Party-centred patronage democracies are characterized by strong party control over state resources, prevalence of longer-term, ‘relational’ forms of clientelism, emphasis on clientelistic exchange of state resources rather than money, and reliance on party-networks to distribute these resources. Such patterns are also characteristic of electoral authoritarian regimes with resilient parties. Among our cases, Turkey, Malaysia, and Ghana are examples. At the other end of the spectrum are community-centred patronage democracies where party control over state resources is weak and politicians rely more on personal, nonparty networks. In these countries, clientelistic practices more often take the form of one-off exchanges of money and community gifts” (Berenschot and Aspinall 2020, p. 3).

Many important developments can be pointed out to depict this change. It is possible to see the rise of party patronage as one of the most important factors that caused the Democratic Party (DP) to win the election in 1950. The DP was able to gain the local power holders (notables) to the party organizations who could mobilize the votes of the electorate and turn them into “party bosses”. Local power holders, who have important resources such as land and money, have succeeded in directing their traditional patronage relationship with the villagers and the town population and the loyalty based on this towards party support in the elections (Unbehauen 2006, p. 198; Güneş-Ayata 1990). The DP, which came to power in the 1950 elections, directed state resources and services through the party, and expanded the clientelistic exchange relationship and networks between the party and the voters. As a result, it emerged as the dominant party in all the elections held until it was overthrown by a military coup in 1960. Democratic elections and multi-party competition have transformed traditional patrons into party brokers while turning large rural dependent constituencies into clients who support party bosses in exchange for various help and support using personal or party resources (Sayarı 1977; Unbehauen 2006). The voting rights that the ordinary people do not have in the traditional patronage relationship and the preference opportunities created by the party competition mean that the new resources available to the clients will expand, and therefore the reciprocity and power balance between the patron and the client will change a little more in favor of the clients. On the other hand, although patronage ties played an important role in voter mobilization and political participation during the DP period (1950–60), the fact that the party came to power alone in successive elections (in 1954 and 1957) strengthened partisan ties among voters with high patronage and resource dependency, which in turn weakened competition and fostered political polarization. Ultimately, it was the military intervention that ended this political polarization.

The main developments that left their mark on Turkish politics after 1960 were the rapid industrialization and urbanization processes. Two processes brought about great changes in the social structure. A shift from the traditional rural society to the modern urban industrial and service society has accelerated. It should be noted that the new democratic institutions established through the Constitution of 1961 also accompanied this situation. All these conditions reveal the increasing importance of political parties, citizen participation, and election processes. While many new political parties were seen to be formed during this period, the Justice Party (AP), a follower of the old DP, and the Republican People’s Party (CHP) emerged as the two strongest central parties. The most important result of this process is that party competition around national and local elections has increased considerably. Political parties are faced with the increasing demands and social problems (job, land, infrastructure services, loans, etc.) of many voter groups, especially the urban poor. At the same time, parties have begun to penetrate the bureaucracy intensively by becoming the main agency in the access of voters to state resources and services because of the increased policies and investments of state institutions that regulate social life and target social and economic development. Since the distribution of state resources for development and investment projects was controlled by elected government parties, the ruling parties, which provide rural and urban services and

resource distribution in return for electoral support, regulate the flow of resources through vertical clientelistic networks from local to national level. While the parties build their local networks strongly in the urban environment, they turn to the construction of personal, hierarchical, and informal exchange relations and networks by recruiting party brokers with strong economic and social capital in the local area. First, the Justice Party and since the late 1960s the CHP organizations have begun to turn into such urban party machines (Güneş-Ayata 1994; Sayarı 2014, p. 660; Schüler 2002, p. 107 et al.). The development of party organizations in the urban environment is described by Güneş-Ayata as follows: “Party organizations in these new communities create links, sometimes using traditional loyalties brought by the migrants from the rural areas. As a result, in the squatter housing areas old neighborhood leaders were replaced by the party officials whose link to the community was ethnic. They might be trade union officials or other upwardly mobile people from that community; what they had in common was access to central resources. These officials claimed greater awareness of the political processes and information about the distribution of spoils. They were ‘brokers’ rather than ‘patrons’ in this system. The formally elected party officials, such as executive committee members, mayors, and councilmen, were able to assert their influence because of their proximity to the centers of power. The most sought-after resources were employment and squatter rights, both of which are very individualized forms of spoils” (Güneş-Ayata 1994, p. 56).

While the urbanization process encouraged the disintegration of the social structure of rural communities, it paved the way for the development of new types of socialization (such as ethnic, religious, neighborly, civic, professional organizations and trade unions) built among urban immigrants, and that political clientelism spread thus in such organizations. As a result, the democratic institutional framework that encouraged party competition and broad political participation in the period between 1960 and 1980 enabled the development and expansion of party-centered clientelistic exchange relations and networks. The weak economic development and high dependency on capitalist industry and market relations in the face of the demands of the accelerating urbanization process increased social inequality and led primarily urban immigrants and the poor to political participation based on clientelistic resource exchange, and the importance of party-brokers in resource distribution continued to increase. Instead of coherent programmatic distribution and development of socioeconomic policies, national and local political party elites, especially government parties, tend to respond to the particular material demands of the voters in the context of patronage (Heper and Keyman 1998). The increasing importance of access to state resources and services, which diversified with the planned economic initiatives of the state towards industrialization and the intensification of public investments in this period, reveals another dynamic that leads urban and rural politicians to clientelistic exchanges with the electorate. State resources and bureaucracy become the most important instruments of clientelistic exchange through parties (Güneş-Ayata 1994; Heper and Keyman 1998). They become areas of power struggle in which access to resources very intensifies, that it can be distributed in a way that enables broad electoral support of parties, thus boosting party competition extremely. As a result, increased party rivalry and social inequalities in this period brought about

the expansion of clientelistic exchange relations and networks and became one of the important factors feeding political polarization and violence, as well as ideological-cultural divisions. It was a military intervention that took place in 1980, which could end the violence and polarization.

The military intervention destroyed the institutional framework created by the Constitution of 1961 and closed down the existing political parties and most of the non-governmental organizations, especially the trade unions. The new constitution that was prepared strengthened the executive organs and limited civil liberties. The junta imposed a political ban on former party leaders and aimed to weaken the previously formed patronage networks by prohibiting parties from establishing grass-roots organizations (Heper and Keyman 1998, p. 266; Schöler 2002, p. 114–115). ANAP (Motherland Party), which came to power in the elections held in 1983 after three years of military rule, prioritized the implementation of neo-liberal economic policies, while the low party competition and the absence of strong local party organizations in these years set partial limits to the patronage politics. However, the political liberalization after 1987 enabled the former patronage party leaders and organizations to return to politics and increased the number of parties and competition again. Towards the end of the 1980s, most of the political parties, especially ANAP, quickly returned to the policy of patronage (Heper and Keyman 1998, p. 268). The weakening of social-political organizations by military intervention, neo-liberal economic policies, ongoing rapid urbanization, and urban poverty problems intensifying in big cities have revived the patron-client relations that have left their mark on the interaction between political party organizations, supporters, and voters for long time. The Islamic-conservative elites that rose in the political and social arena during the 1990s organized the Welfare Party (RP) and had a particularly strong presence against the center-right (ANAP, DYP) and left-wing parties (Social Democratic People Party (SHP)/Republican People Party (CHP)). It started to gain power by taking the popular support of low-income and poor immigrant voters in the cities. The RP assumed the administrations of metropolitan municipalities such as Istanbul and Ankara in the local elections in 1994 and rose to the position of the first party with 21% of the votes in the general elections in 1995. Among other factors, it is possible to argue that the mass support for the Welfare Party was due to widespread clientelistic exchange relations (Sayarı 2014, p. 661). With its access to local and national public resources, the party had the opportunity to expand its clientelistic networks, but this rise of the Islamic-conservative elites led to a military memorandum in February 1997 which hence ended with the overthrow of the RP and DYP coalition government. Subsequently, the RP was closed, and its executives were banned from politics for five years. The economic and political representation crisis that deepened after the military intervention was only partially resolved when the AKP (Justice and Development Party), which was founded in 2001 under the leadership of former RP politicians, came to power alone in the elections of 2002.

5 Clientelism of the AKP and Declining Competitive Democracy

The 1990s witnessed the rise of the Islamic-conservative ruling elites in the political arena, who built an effective social organization network in the economic and public sphere in the face of the widespread economic and political representation crisis of the traditional center-right and left parties and the loss of their power caused by the social problems of urban poverty. This rise caused the army to intervene in civilian politics again and brought about the closure of the rising RP in the political arena. Despite all these interventions, AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*-Justice and Development Party), which was founded in 2001 under the leadership of moderate cadres that broke away from the Islamic-conservative RP, gained the support of large electoral groups and came to power alone in the 2002 elections. In the local elections in 2004, AKP assumed also the ruling of the majority of the metropolitan municipalities whose resources had expanded and became the only dominant party at the local level.¹⁰ Among many other factors, the electoral success of AKP at the national and local level, is based on a broad network of civil society¹¹ that encompasses highly heterogeneous urban social-class strata (entrepreneurs, workers, artisans, professionals, intellectuals, women, etc.), uniting and mobilizing around an Islamic collective belonging and identity (White 2002; Tuğal 2009; Doğan 2019). Islamic foundations, associations, trade unions, companies, and charities operating at local and national levels have established tight-knit formal and informal networks of relations in different local urban-social contexts. In a short time, these organizations in civil society became a part of AKP's clientelistic election strategies and politics. Many studies have drawn attention to the role of a wide variety of actors in civil society operating locally in the formation and development of AKP's clientelistic strategies aimed at elections or developing and maintaining relations with its voter base (Arslantaş and Arslantaş 2020; Ark-Yıldırım 2017; Joppien 2018). This situation indicates that, especially during the AKP period, vertical clientelistic relations also expanded rapidly at the horizontal level (Sayarı 2014). In this way, the developing civil society has been restrained and has become more dependent on clientelistic resources through the AKP.

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) has taken after all on the political mobilization of this mutually nourishing civil society network and has become a fundamental intermediary for its integration into the state. This is the case both in filling bureaucratic positions and in accessing state resources. In a brief period, the party became a hegemonic power apparatus by integrating with the wide civil society network. This hegemonic party, which assumed the state administration in 2002, managed to stay in power alone by winning all the general elections (2007, 2011, 2015, 2018, and 2023) held until today and engendered a tendency towards a low competitive dominant party system from a multi-party system with high competition level. Although this trend has not been fully realized and seems to be questioned to-

¹⁰ When AKP was founded in 2001, one of the most important factors in quickly establishing its cadre and organizations was its reliance on the practices and cadre of the RP period. AKP benefited greatly from the RP experience in building and expanding local network of relationships (Doğan 2019, p. 42).

¹¹ The concept of civil society used here has a Gramscian rather than a normative-ideal content.

day, the AKP has managed to maintain its hegemonic power in the general elections. As pointed out in previous sections, the main point is that one of the most important tools and mechanisms of the formation and development of dominant party systems is clientelistic distribution strategies through the hegemonic party. The ability to overcome electoral competition and govern alone largely depends on these strategies. The basic mechanisms of the dominant party system formed by the AKP also have similar features. This long dominant position allowed the ruling party to monopolize the distribution of almost all public resources in a clientelistic manner, reducing the level of competition of opposition parties through the advantages of clientelistic distribution in elections, and at the same time giving the opportunity to govern alone again. One of the main reasons why this is possible—according to the basic assumption here—is that the AKP follows a strategy of distributing public resources in a clientelistic manner by involving civil society and therefore manages to build a wide clientelistic support network. By activating these networks during election periods, AKP managed to remain in power alone for a long time. It is therefore not possible to understand the electoral success of the AKP independently of the existence of a strong civil society network that supports and mobilizes it. However, the more important dimension of this phenomenon in terms of democratic development is related to the new situation that emerged because of AKP's access and control of the monopolistic state and public resources together with a wide civil society network. Unlike previous periods, the long-term electoral success of the AKP is based, first of all, on the expansion of clientelistic distribution strategies as much as possible, including a wider civil society network, and thus minimizing the electoral competition of opposition parties that would endanger its incumbency. This new situation is consequently related to the fact that the AKP has intensively turned to the political patronage or clientelistic strategy, which has a strong continuity in the RP, in order to gain and maintain the support and loyalty of civil society and voters, and has spread it at the local and national political level (Esen and Gümüşçü 2016, 2021; Çarkoğlu and Aytaç 2015; Sayarı 2014; Arslantaş 2019; Gürakar and Bircan 2019). It is also worth noting the role of material and cultural factors promoting this fundamental tendency of the party “from below”. The intensity of the needs and demands nurtured by the economic living conditions of large electoral groups, especially the urban sub-classes and the poor, and the clientelistic political participation form that has long been established in political-cultural tendencies, lead the AKP to construct a broad clientelistic exchange and distribution network that responds to the material needs and demands of civil society and voters.

Through monopolistic access and control of resources, the AKP has transformed into clientelistic party machines and created a wide network of party brokers at both the local and national levels, who regulate clientelistic exchanges and resource flows with actors in civil society and voters. Thus, a form of “relational clientelism” (Berenschot and Aspinall 2020, p. 8), in which monopolistic state resources were distributed in a party-centered manner, became strongly established and can hence intervene in solving the daily problems of the party base and voters. Many studies on the clientelistic policies that developed during the AKP period draw attention to the fact that the AKP clientelism differed from the previous center-right or left parties both quantitatively and qualitatively (Sayarı 2014; Arslantaş 2019; Yıldırım 2020).

Other political parties have never been able to maintain their electoral dominance for such a long period and thus have been unable to gain full control over public resources (Esen and Gümüşşü 2021, p. 1081). Similarly, Baykan argues that one of the most important features that distinguish AKP-era clientelism is the decline of influential and diverse local patrons in previous periods, and the AKP bureaucracy becoming the sole patron. Thus, “the classical politics of patronage has given way to the ‘machine politics’ of widespread, disciplined mass party organization, which is systematically, bureaucratically administered, and which establishes tightly woven clientelistic relations between local party elites, businessmen, municipal elites and poor voters” (Baykan 2021, p. 38). Based on his fieldwork in Istanbul, Arslantaş emphasizes that this clientelistic network, which expanded into many different sectors, is one of the most important aspects of the AKP era that distinguishes it from the clientelistic policies of previous parties, and argues that thanks to these distributive policies, it gained the support of the voters and civil society and built the dominant party system. “The AKP organization is crucial for the functioning of the clientelist network because of its ability to guide, mobilize, and monitor clients and reach new ones. This feature distinguishes the AKP from previous incumbents (for example, the ANAP), which could not transform the party system into a predominant one because they failed to establish effective monitoring and relied solely on the charismatic leader to underwrite clientelist exchange” (Arslantaş 2019, p. 16).¹² Arslantaş draws attention to the fact that this proliferation, being the most important factor transforming the party system, has made quite different actors such as party administrators, local municipal politicians, the Ministry of Family and Social Policy, businessmen, foundations, and local headman to a part of a large clientelistic provider and beneficiary network (Arslantaş 2019, p. 112). The determination that the spread of clientelistic exchange relations to quite different sectors is the main feature of clientelism in the AKP period has emerged as a common emphasis of many studies on this subject. Similarly, Yıldırım, who worked on clientelism in Turkey, emphasized that the AKP period, unlike other single-party periods, experienced an expansion in clientelistic policies in different forms. This has occurred in two ways: first, by making the social assistance policy field an intensive part of the clientelist exchange, and on the other hand, the state has created a group of economic capital dependent on itself through long-term monopolistic control over its resources. During the AKP period, clientelist networks expanded as a result of combining existing vertical networks with horizontal networks covering civil society (Yıldırım 2020: 89). It should not be forgotten that at the center of this broad clientelistic network are party organizations that constantly interact with voters. Many researchers have also emphasized this point. In addition to the networks in civil society that interacts with the party and sometimes intertwines with it, attention is

¹² Düzgün Arslantaş and Şenol Arslantaş also draws attention to this fundamental difference as follows: “Last but not least, the AKP monitors clients before and after the elections. This feature distinguishes the AKP from previous incumbents (for example, the Motherland Party [Anavatan Partisi, ANAP]), which was unable to transform the party system into a predominant one because it failed to establish effective monitoring and relied solely on its charismatic leader to underwrite clientelist exchange. The AKP, though, monitors clients through a sophisticated organization that has adequate and up-to-date information on clients because of its daily close contact with them.” (Arslantaş ve Arslantaş 2020, p. 6).

also drawn to the existence of a very wide organizational network of the party at the local level. Local studies investigating clientelism emphasize that clientelist resource distribution would not be possible without a wide organizational grassroots network (party brokers, partisans, members and activists) that the AKP can mobilize during election periods. AKP's grassroots organizations have a mechanism that collects information about neighborhoods and local voter groups, establishes constant daily relations with them, identifies their needs and helps them in solving their daily problems. These mechanisms also point to channels that ensure the effective distribution of existing privileged access to public resources in election processes and thus the transformation of resources into votes (Arslantaş 2019; Yıldırım 2020; Ark-Yıldırım 2017).

Clientelism, which became widespread during the AKP period, also meant a strong expansion of a clientelistic relationship between the political power and economic actors, rather than leading to a result such as the withdrawal of the state from the economic field, as recommended by the neoliberal ideological view. Such relationships are very important because they indicate both the production and distribution of new resources. For instance using a political economic framework, Marshall, Aydoğan and Bulut argue that clientelistic distribution occurs specifically through the Mass Housing Administration (TOKİ), and that neoliberal economic policies thus allow the production of new resources and explain the party's continued success in elections (Marshall et al. 2016). "We argue that Turkey's Mass Housing Administration (TOKİ) has played key role in providing material benefits to fuel distributive politics and that these resources (jobs, contracts, and subsidized housing), have helped the AKP consolidate and expand its electoral strength." (Marshall et al. 2016, p. 202). Other researchers such as Gürakar and Bircan have made similar findings. They also drew attention to dependency networks based on clientelism in their joint study. Once such dependency networks are established, by operating the reward and punishment mechanism, both voters (public services) and companies (procurement contracts) are kept under control, party politics is financed (through companies close to the AKP) and re-election is secured (Gürakar and Bircan 2019). In all the elections it has entered since 2001, the AKP has managed to win the government as a single party, and many metropolitan municipality administrations. Although it is accepted that it is not possible to explain this success with a single factor, it was able to create a wide distributive interest network by including many social segments listed above in the neo-liberal development program. Gürakar and Bircan also explain the success and continuity of the AKP in the elections with its ability to build a wide network of alliances or dependencies that generate rent in different forms for different social segments. It is claimed that those who can get their share from this rent or clientelistic distribution, one way or another, develop a strong loyalty to the party and cause a large partisan voter group to form (Gürakar and Bircan 2019; Arslantaş 2019). Drawing attention to such clientelist dependency networks, they point to three main areas in the formation of these networks: rent generation through lawmaking, rent distribution, and use that creates dependent private companies, and use of new resources distributed to voters (Gürakar and Bircan 2019, p. 72). The authors point out the social housing projects (TOKİ), and municipal services that touch the lives of the voters, and the targeted distribution

of these construction projects and municipal services to private companies close to them through contract. The executives of the companies to whom these contracts are awarded may be people who are active in AKP cadres at different levels, close relatives of AKP executives, organizations close to the AKP, or non-governmental organizations. The authors emphasized that by following a strategy based on these two areas, the AKP succeeded in keeping both private firms and voter groups in a relationship of dependency and thus protecting their networks (Gürakar and Bircan 2019, p. 72). Esen and Gümüşçü draw attention similarly to the interdependencies produced by clientelistic relations, especially the triangular relations of interdependence between businessmen, party elites, and voters (Esen and Gümüşçü 2021, p. 1080). “In this relationship ... pro-AKP business is dependent on the government for capital accumulation through public procurement, construction permits, cheap credit, and tax reliefs. The AKP, in turn, is dependent on the business for financial, material, and human resources in the form of campaign contributions, government-friendly media, donations to pro-AKP charities and foundations, and the provision of goods to the urban poor.” (Esen and Gümüşçü 2021, p. 1080).¹³

Studies also argue that, in addition to the extraordinary prevalence of clientelistic policies, this phenomenon has also significant effects on a semi-democratic regime that is already crippled by authoritarianism. Chief among these is the decline of competitive democracy around elections. This decline, which is largely seen as related to clientelistic relations and policies, is linked up to the AKP's long-term election as the sole ruling party. Clientelism, which became widespread during the AKP period, played a very important role in the formation of the dominant party system. Monopolistic access to public resources and the existence of strong party and civil society networks that distribute them effectively are very important. On the other hand, this development eliminated the conditions for opposition parties to compete effectively with the dominant party in the elections. The opposition's ability to compete against the dominant government party has decreased, especially due to the difficulties they have in accessing clientelistic public resources.¹⁴ While different names are given to the new situation emerging in terms of democracy, it is seen that the regime that emerged as a result of the AKP's monopolistic politics since 2013 is often referred to as a competitive authoritarian regime (Esen and Gümüşçü 2016; Baykan 2021; Somer 2016). Although the party came to power by winning the elections one after the other, and thus a tendency towards the dominant party system emerged, considering the existence of multiple and relatively competitive opposition parties, the

¹³ In the AKP period, clientelistic practices and distribution are certainly not limited to elections. However, it is seen that such distribution practices intensify, especially in the election processes. For example, in their empirical study based on the survey data conducted after the 2011 general election Çarkoğlu and Aytaç concluded that the practice of vote buying is one of the basic facts faced by one out of every three voters in Turkey (Çarkoğlu and Aytaç 2015). The authors determine that some general qualifications of the voters are also important here. It is emphasized that especially voters with low education levels or poor voters are more sensitive to vote-buying strategies. These results show that the dispossessed immigrant communities who migrated to the city have emerged as the main target group of the clientelistic strategies of political parties, especially the AKP.

¹⁴ Many local studies have observed that the AKP has a very advantageous position against opposition parties even in local elections due to its monopolistic access to central state resources (Yıldırım 2020; Ark-Yıldırım 2017).

regime did not completely lose its competitive character, but authoritarian tendencies also gained strength. In this context, Esen and Gümüşçü point out that studies that draw attention to clientelistic networks do not sufficiently reveal the effect of such practices on the democratic decline (Esen and Gümüşçü 2021, p. 1079). According to these authors, even though the distribution of resources in a clientelistic manner and the dependency networks built between different segments of society (such as businessmen, entrepreneurs, voters, civil society, media) created an unequal political field of action, it did not automatically lead to democratic collapse. (Esen and Gümüşçü 2021, p. 1085). We may not be able to talk about a democratic collapse, but we can say that the competition level of the opposition has always remained at a low level and perhaps decreased due to clientelistic advantages, among other factors. Although the opposition won the local elections in some metropolitan municipalities (especially Istanbul and Ankara) in 2019, AKP's re-election in the national elections 2023 showed that there was no significant change in favor of the opposition at the level of competition. The main problem here is seen as the fact that the cost of an opposition party winning the elections and losing their dependency networks and resources because of the change in power has increased considerably for both the party and its supporters. As this cost increases, the authors point out that tendencies such as attacks on civil liberties, suppressing opposition movements, and criminalizing opposition have become a fundamental stance of the government, especially with the state of emergency declared after 2016, and argue that these policies, which damage competitiveness, accelerate a process of democratic decline (Esen and Gümüşçü 2021, p. 1085). Even if these findings are correct, its effect on electoral competition in favor of the dominant party shows that clientelistic expansion significantly weakens the conditions of democratic election. It also shows that opposition parties had to turn to clientelistic policies in the elections in order to compete. In this case, it raises important questions about how programmatic policies can come on the agenda of Turkish politics instead of clientelistic distribution.

Clientelism can also undermine conditions for democratic accountability and citizenship. This situation is related to both the ability of voters to change the incumbent government freely and equally in the election and the disruption of legal control of bureaucratic processes. Other researchers have drawn attention to the same context and emphasized the importance of such clientelistic strategies in electoral dominance and building the dominant party position. The continuation of clientelistic distribution is ensured through the advantage of the use of state resources and the regulations that cause these resource expenditures to lose their transparency (such as the constant amendment of public procurement laws and restrictions on the audit of public expenditures by the Court of Accounts) (Çarkoğlu and Aytaç 2015, p. 563; Buğra and Savaşkan 2015). The widespread expansion of clientelistic policies generally creates a situation incompatible with democratic citizenship. In an environment of high political competition, clients have a better chance of improving their position vis-à-vis the political patrons. The clientelistic strategy expanded during the AKP period, in which the level of party competition decreased considerably, and also limited the development of consciousness of democratic citizenship and practices. In this period, the level of dependency of large groups of voters, especially the poor, on the party increased and their negotiation power weakened in

the face of a single political patron of AKP. As the vote-buying practices identified above showed, the AKP preferred to expand the field of informal social assistance rather than institutionalizing social welfare that would strengthen rights-based equal democratic citizenship. In addition to central government institutions, metropolitan municipalities whose resources have partially expanded have also turned into places where social aid and service provision is concentrated in return for votes or political support, as well as large clientelistic exchange and distribution (Sayarı 2014, p. 662; Joppien 2018, p. 115–137). In this informal field, social assistance and services have ceased to be a fundamental right provided by the state to every citizen and have been transferred to clientelistic party channels and turned into an informal tool that the party apparatus and persons can give or withdraw in return for votes (Somer 2016). Instead of a social welfare policy based on equal rights, support was provided to poor groups through philanthropic networks supported by private companies and foundations close to the AKP (Buğra und Savaşkan 2015). Again in this period, in a study on the distribution of educational aid (conditional cash transfer service) to poor children financed with World Bank loans for educational aid to children, it was found that these aids were made by the boards operating within the local government bureaucracy. It has been concluded that these supports, together with the interventions of the local organizations of the ruling party, are mainly directed towards localities, which are ideologically close to the party and where opposition parties as its main rivals are located (Aytaç 2014). Informal social support and aid constituted another important dimension of maintaining and expanding patron-client relations between the party and voters in this period and it appears as one of the important obstacles to the development of democratic citizenship. The spread of clientelistic distribution can produce effects that damage the bond of democratic equal citizenship by causing exclusion in opposition parties and electoral groups. The exclusionary clientelistic distribution policies contributed to the increasing political-social polarization as well as ideological-cultural distinctions (ethnic, religious-sectarian, class, etc.) during the AKP period. As emphasized before, the clientelistic politics in Turkey had effects that fostered conflict and polarization among political elites and dragged democratic institutions into crisis. A general political-social polarization and conflictual environment contributed by the spread of clientelistic politics, especially after 2013 (the Gezi protests, the conflict with the Gülen community, and the 2016 coup attempt), accelerated and brought the AKP's gradual autocratization and authoritarianism under the leadership of Erdoğan (Somer 2021). The institutionalization of this process resulted in the Presidential Government System, which came into force as a result of the 2017 referendum. This process has led to an even stronger monopolization of existing clientelistic policies and has given rise to a government apparatus in which the decision-making processes in general are further centralized and monopolized. As a result, the clientelistic distribution mechanism continued to be maintained in a more monopolistic and centralized manner and constituted one of the most important obstacle to the development of a democratic regime in Turkey. In order to compete with the dominant party, more or less strong opposition parties are also forced to use their available resources through clientelistic electoral strategies. This makes it difficult to move away from clientelistic politics to a programmatic distributive politics.

6 Conclusion

Turkey took an important step in competitive democratization by adopting a multi-party system after 1946. Democratization based on electoral competition continued its existence with periodic interruptions until recently and turn political parties into key political actors. Political parties have also become the main institutional mass apparatus of rapid socio-economic change and integration that accompany this process and express the transition from a rural social structure to an urban industrial society. The interaction of local and national party organizations with different voter groups around the election competition has intensified and wide networks of party members, supporters, and voters have been built. In this context, basic structural problems such as intense socio-economic inequalities and the weakness of intermediary and autonomous horizontal organizations of civil society have ensured the prevalence and continuity of vertical clientelistic exchange relations and ties in local and national political party organizations and party-voter interaction. This continuity has hindered the development of the party and voter interaction toward programmatic distribution and open public debate. Another important factor feeding this continuity has been the tendency of the ruling parties, which have access to state resources, to turn to clientelism, which ensures broad electoral support and dependency as a condition for staying in power, instead of programmatic distribution. During the AKP period from 2002 to the present, clientelistic practices have expanded considerably and turned into the main tool for staying in power. Clientelistic policies hindered the formation of an autonomous civil society by involving the developing civil society actors as well as the party, state institutions, and voters, and created a very wide dependency network extending to different sectors of the society dependent on clientelistic distribution. Such networks of dependency ensured the AKP's long-term electoral success and contributed significantly to the reproduction of the authoritarianism of the political regime by damaging democratic political competition and accountability. The main conclusion to be drawn from all this is that opposition forces aiming for democratization should first and foremost demand and implement measures and policies aimed at eliminating the structural conditions that nurture clientelistic policies in the interaction between political parties and voters.

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