DISCUSSION PAPER



TİP's Political Path: Class Struggle or Identity Politics?

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TRT WORLD research centre

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Introduction

The socialist leftist movement in Türkiye has a deep-rooted tradition dating back to the Ottoman period. However, socialism has not been able to assert itself strongly in Turkish politics. With the 2018 general elections, the Workers' Party of Türkiye (TİP) had the chance to be represented in parliament, first with two and then with four deputies. TİP chairman Erkan Baş and Barış Atay Mengüllüoğlu entered the elections from the HDP lists and returned to their party after the elections and gained representation in parliament 53 years after appearing under the name Workers' Party of Türkiye.



Workers' Party of Türkiye (TİP) Chairman Erkan Baş cast his vote for the Presidential and 28th Term Parliamentary Elections in Kadıköy. (Ahmet Esad Şani - Anadolu Agency)

TİP: An Old Name for a New Party

Despite the similarities in name, TİP is a new party. The naming similitude was designed to create parallels with the past. The original party with the same name managed to get 3% of the vote and 15 deputies in the 1965 elections. These deputies were well-known names of the Turkish left, such as Mehmet Ali Aybar, Behice Boran and Çetin Altan. This electoral success remained in the collective memory of the Turkish left. However, no similar success could be achieved as time passed by.

The new TİP frequently refers to this memory in its name and discourse. For example, Sera Kadıgil, the only female MP of TİP who joined the party from the CHP, makes a humorous reference by saying, "I couldn't leave Behice Boran's party to men" when she declares that she will continue politics in TİP (Tele1 [YouTube Channel], 25 June 2021). Chairman Erkan Baş, on the other hand, frequently states that their goal is to produce effective opposition by getting more deputies into parliament, even with fewer votes, referring to the old TİP.

The nostalgia for the old TİP reveals an important picture. The radical left wants to regain a prominent place in Turkish politics. Although Türkiye has seen some socialist politicians in parliament, socialist politics has been mired with discord and schisms. As such, it remained confined to marginalised groups and devious power struggles outside the parliament. TİP's key strategy is to change this image. However, the picture emerging from the 2023 elections shows that TİP did not achieve the success it had hoped for. The party, which had four MPs* before the polls, got four parliamentary seats again in the 2023 elections. They could only preserve their standing, knowing that TİP contested this election alone for the first time, obtaining a vote share of 1,73%. From this perspective, this election result can be considered a relative success. However, when one looks at the repartition of the votes, one can see they came from high socio-economic areas rather than working-class neighbourhoods.

The example of TİP reflects some characteristics of the Turkish left. The latter aims to modernise and enlighten the working class as much as to give a voice to the voiceless. In their view, socialism serves primarily as a vehicle for enlightenment and modernisation, at least in the Turkish public sphere. In this respect, when the discourse of TİP is analysed, it can be said that they are in an in-between position. Using Marxist terminology, TİP seems to fill a contradictory posture between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

TİP claims to be engaged in working-class politics. However, it mostly advocates values embraced by the Turkish bourgeoisie. In this vein, besides claiming to be a party waging class conflict, it assumed the role of a bridge between the secular middle and upper classes, on the one hand, and the working class, on the other. But the election results showed that the working-class pillar of this bridge is not very strong.

The second in-between position is that TİP conveys the ideology of enlightenment, which in many ways, contradicts the people's beliefs and customs. Although in the first contradiction, the party tries to position itself on the side of the working class, in this second issue, TİP takes the sides of the upper classes, whose main agenda for a long time was pushing for more Westernisation. In a society like Türkiye's, where religion plays a central role, this issue emerges primarily through the discourse of secularism.

These two positions overlap with each other. They emerge as different sides of the same coin. However, as its historical baggage accumulates, TİP's agenda unfolds before the electorate not as a class struggle but as identity politics. This orientation can be analysed by looking at TİP's discourse during the 2023 elections and the election results. Therefore, the party's narrative is not bought by the working class, most of whom are conservative. The results of the last elections clearly show this aspect.

TİP's Paradoxes

Between Bourgeoisie and Proletariat

On paper, TİP is a party that sides with the working class against the capitalists and wants this class to have its fair share of power. Its programme is formed within this framework and aims to make socialism a reality (TİP official website). Thus, highlighting the class struggle is the main political agenda for this party. This position is also reflected in the party's actions. During the election campaign, the four leading figures of the party tried to explain their ideology to the people.

In addition to focusing on the problems of the working class, they tried to express socialist politics in a popular language. For example, in the period leading up to the 2023 elections, one of the most memorable statements of chairman Erkan Baş was, "Everyone will own the house they live in" (HalkTV [YouTube Channel], 20 December 2022). With these and similar sensationalist announcements, they tried to convey a socialist utopia, hoping to persuade more voters. In addition, they saw themselves as the main opposition group that advocates on behalf of the working class.

On the other hand, TİP also had a discourse targeting the upper-middle classes. One of the most revealing moments of this strategy was when TİP nominated some celebrities as parliamentary candidates. Famous actor Mehmet Aslantuğ, anchor İrfan Değirmenci, and chef Ali Ronay were among the most prominent of these names. This approach received various criticisms. In a clip that went viral on the internet, the following dialogue occurred between a viewer and the TİP MPs in a youtube program (BabalaTV [YouTube Channel], 9 May 2023).

"Your first-row candidates are usually popular people. Like Mehmet Aslantuğ, İrfan Değirmenci. How do you fit this into the basic political policy of a labour, a workers' party?" asked the viewer.

> — Why? Are Mehmet Aslantuğ and İrfan Değirmenci not workers? (Barış Atay, TİP MP)
>
> — He is no more a worker than an İgdaş worker. (The viewer)
>
> — There is no such a thing as being more or less a working person (Sera Kadıgil TİP MP)
>
> — Are you a worker? (Ahmet Şık TİP MP)
>
> — Yes, I am a worker, but I don't spend my summers on a yacht in Bodrum. Don't you have any self-criticism about this?
>
> — We don't (TİP MPs answered together)."

The celebrities, who were not known for their socialist identity but rather for their elite lifestyle, represented part of TİP's strategy to attract the middle-upper classes. Meanwhile, this strategy also allowed the party to position itself on the radar of secular elites worried about their status under the AK Party rule. This newly found posture permitted TİP to put the issue of secularism on the agenda, even criticising CHP, which had until then positioned itself as the defender of secularism. According to TİP, CHP was no longer defending secularism adequately. So, when the TİP leaders said, "Secularism is the problem of the working class today", this statement resonated more with elite neighbourhoods than working-class neighbourhoods.

Between Enlightenment and People

TİP's emphasis on secularism is not random. It is one of Türkiye's most important symbols of identity politics that has been ongoing since 1950 to the present day. This issue has created heightened tensions between right-wing parties that define themselves as close to the conservative and religious quarters and the Kemalist Parties that advocate secularism. This emphasis can be understood in two ways. The first is hidden in Marx's famous statement that "religion is the opium of the masses". The party's post-election evaluation stated that religion is used functionally to establish capitalism in Türkiye (TİP official website, 1 July 2023). According to Marxism's distinction between superstructure and substructure, religion in Türkiye (as per TİP's ideology) is a product of the superstructure and is an obstacle to the emergence of the substructure and economic relations. According to TİP, the remedy for this problem lies in secularism.

Secondly, secularism is treated as a self-evident value in the same evaluation. It is stated that secularism is under threat in Türkiye and that one of the biggest dangers of the coming years is "the attempts by fundamentalist and jihadist parties and cults to scrape off secularism from the social life altogether" (ibid.). In this context, secularism is also on TİP's agenda as an intrinsic value unrelated to social justice and economic equality.

In the period leading up to the 2023 elections, secularism also found its place in the speeches of the party's four deputies, who were the face of the party, as harsh remarks from time to time. For example, Barış Atay even talked about shutting down sects and congregations (KRT Kultur TV [YouTube Channel], 9 December 2022). Another MP, Sera Kadıgil, addressed the issue from a different angle.

"They want to ban our secular lifestyle, they don't want us to drink, they don't want us to go out and have fun, they want us to live the way they want us to live. In other words, they want us to live according to Sharia law." (Tele1 [YouTube Channel], 19 April 2022)

President Erkan Baş criticised other opposition parties, including the CHP, for not putting secularism on the agenda enough (TV100 [YouTube Channel], 11 November 2022).

Another example can be added to these. TİP's emphasis on secularism comes from both ideological and strategic dimensions. Ideologically, TİP is a party that defends the values of enlightenment and progress. In parallel with Marxist historical theory, it reads human history from an ideologically progressive prism. From TİP's point of view, although religion can be respected in the private sphere, its role in the public sphere must be eradicated.

Interviews with young people who are members of the TİP organisation in Konya, a city known for conservatism, reveal an interesting case (Medyascope [YouTube Channel], 26 January 2022). These young people said they turned to socialism and TİP after nurturing some religious doubts privately. In other words, questioning religion can form the basis for joining TİP. TİP aims to achieve the same "progress" for society that these young people have "achieved".

This ideological stance is an important hallmark of the political tradition from which TİP emerged. In this respect, mainstream Turkish socialism not only limits itself to working-class politics but also undertakes to promote enlightenment values to the public. This mission is, in a way, reminiscent of the civilising mission.

On the other hand, in the discourse of TİP, secularism was also included in the campaign strategy as a populist discourse. The lifestyle concern expressed by Sera Kadıgil was one of the building blocks of the CHP's campaign for the last two decades. However, Baş points out that the CHP de-emphasised secularism in the previous election. It even formed alliances with religious parties, permitted religious and conservative candidates to enter parliament, and went to the extent of apologising for past discrimination against religious people.

This move caused discomfort among the traditional base of the CHP. TİP's strategy aspired to benefit from this discomfort. TİP showed interest in this constituency by emphasising secularism and raising the CHP's shortcomings on this issue. In addition, TİP openly asked for votes by raising this issue where the CHP nominated candidates from conservative parties. It declared that it was an address that secular voters could vote for with peace of mind. Sera Kadıgil's following remarks are noteworthy in this context.

"Open the [candidate] lists in your city. In Muğla, for example, you want to vote for TİP, but you are worried what if Mehmet Aslantuğ [TİP's candidate] doesn't make it and my vote is wasted. So, you turn to a party that you want less but you want to guarantee your vote. Let's see, in Muğla, for example, the CHP has four deputies. Do you know who the CHP's candidate for 4th place is right now? Selçuk Özdağ. The former deputy chairman of the AK Party... The CHP candidate for Istanbul is Selim Temurci, the former Istanbul provincial chairman of the AK Party." (BabalaTV [YouTube Channel], 9 May 2023)

Selçuk Özdağ and Selim Temurci resigned from the ruling AK Party and founded the Future Party. In this year's elections, due to the alliance between the Future Party and the CHP, they tried to be elected as deputies by nominating their candidates from within the CHP. Two striking points emerge:

First, TİP has different positions from the CHP ideologically. However, they offered their full support to the CHP and its presidential candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. The TİP leaders often said they did not want the CHP to lose votes because of them.

Therefore, they are cautious when determining their parliamentary lists.

Second, when the CHP began fielding numerous conservative candidates, TİP changed its tone and started targeting CHP voters. At that juncture, TİP aspired to attract as many CHP voters as possible. It should be noted that 79 of the 600 parliamentary candidates on the CHP lists represent quotas reserved for conservative parties and that many of these candidates are nominated from metropolitan cities where TİP nurtures significant ambitions.

The secular identity common to CHP and TİP and distinguishing them from other oppositional religious and conservative parties became a political weapon at TİP's hands to increase its tally. The examples of defectors from the ruling party, such as Özdağ and Temurci, who have no track record in the opposition and featuring prominently in the CHP lists, reinforced TİP's argument.

Against this background, Erkan Baş's words are much more striking. "We said let's get a socialist deputy from Ankara's 3rd district, let's say one less Felicity Party member, one less AK Party member, one less MHP member." (ibid.)

Since the AK Party and MHP represent the ruling coalition, it is understandable that TİP considers these parties a fair game. However, the Felicity Party is a religious party that sides with the opposition coalition. It is important to underline that, unlike the Future Party, the Felicity Party has opposed the Ak Party since the beginning. Hence, TİP singling out this party is unfair. But when TİP criticises the Felicity Party, the jab is destined to woo CHP voters.

What's more is that the Felicity Party is much closer to TİP than the CHP, especially regarding its economic policies. Social justice and income inequality are traditionally the main issues on the party's agenda. However, the religious identity of the Felicity Party and its voters is sufficient to create an insurmountable antagonism for TİP. Such also shows how the party's discourse on secularism corresponds to identity politics.



TİP supported CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in the presidential elections. (Emin Sansar - Anadolu Agency)

TİP's Political Position and Election Results

The candidates TİP nominated, and its adoption of secular identity politics make the party's relationship with the working-class problematic. Even though the party nominated symbolically working-class parliamentary candidates, it is hard to say that these names generated excitement among the working class. Analysing the party's votes across Türkiye shows where TİP's politics have the most appeal.

Except for some districts of Hatay, TİP received the highest number of votes from the richest boroughs in Türkiye. The socio-economic ranking of the localities where the party received the highest number of votes across Türkiye is astonishing.

Districts Where Tip Received The Highest Number Of Vote	TİP's Vote	Socio-Economic Development Rank (among 973 districts of Türkiye) (Acar, S. et al.)
Kadıköy	9,60%	4
Adalar	9,36%	55
Konyaaltı	8,67%	27
Karşıyaka	8,61%	37
Beşiktaş	8,44%	3
Bodrum	8,42%	25
Datça	8,07%	140
Şişli	7,66%	1
Çiğli	7,71%	41
Muratpaşa	7,46%	15

This aspect is clear when analysing the distribution of votes in the districts of Istanbul, where TİP received 420,000 votes (nearly half of the 940,000 TİP's total votes). The districts of Istanbul with the highest household incomes were the districts where TİP received the highest number of votes.

Istanbul's Districts with the Highest Household Income (In Order) (İstanbul Valiliği, 2020)	TİP's Vote	Ranking of TİP Vote Share in 39 Districts of Istanbul
Beşiktaş	8,44%	3
Kadıköy	9,60%	1
Bakırköy	7,63%	5
Şişli	7,66%	4
Sarıyer	5,08%	9
Üsküdar	4,72%	12
Adalar	9,36%	2
Ataşehir	5,66%	7
Maltepe	6,19%	6

When we look at the table in reverse, we see that in the districts with the lowest household income, TİP's votes were at the bottom.

Districts with the Lowest Household Income in Istanbul	TİP's Vote	Ranking of TİP Vote Share in 39 Districts of Istanbul
Arnavutköy	1,65%	38
Çatalca	2,11%	36
Sultanbeyli	1,48%	39
Sultangazi	2,70%	32
Silivri	3,28%	24
Şile	3,21%	26
Sancaktepe	3,62%	22
Esenler	1,82%	37
Gaziosmanpaşa	2,58%	33

Ironically, TİP's votes increase as the income level increases. In a way, this shows that TİP's identity politics towards CHP voters was successful. For a party that entered the elections for the first time, winning three deputies from Istanbul and four deputies from Türkiye in general and receiving nearly 10% of the votes in some districts can be considered a significant achievement. However, these votes came from the middle and upper classes, contradicting the *party's raison d'être*. In addition, the locations where TİP scored most were areas where parties had more success emphasising secular and modern lifestyles. Thus, in addition to emphasising class struggle, TİP has filled a clear function in identity politics.

An interesting correlation emerges. Instead of mobilising voters from the lower and working classes, TİP's votes increased in the richest boroughs. Before the elections, TİP also made various discourses about taking the emphasis on secularism out of identity politics. For example, Erkan Baş said: "In the past, secularism may have been perceived as the problem of Kadıköy or Karşıyaka. Today, secularism is the problem of Gebze, Gazi neighbourhood, Alibeyköy" (Çamlıbel, 2023). However, the election results showed that TİP's discourse was more popular in upper-class neighbourhoods like Kadıköy and Karşıyaka than in other lower-class areas.



(Mehmet Ali Özcan - Anadolu Agency)

TİP's Test

The election results show that TİP managed to get more votes from the upper classes. Its discourse during the election process and its voter profile can be considered one of the main factors behind TİP's tally. What are the issues that could confront this party in the future?

Several issues stand in front of TİP. The grassroots' objections to the candidacy of various celebrities are one of them. But there are other factors. The nature of the working class is more complex today than it was in Karl Marx's time. New concepts such as white-collar workers and precariat are debated in leftist literature. However, two facts are clear: TİP has not been able to present itself as an attractive address for blue-collar workers, who are still present in high numbers in Türkiye. Moreover, emphasis on secularism, in particular, resonates as identity politics in the ears of the working class, most of whom hold conservative views.

In this context, it is important to remember that the religious-secular polarisation in Türkiye was diluted in the 2023 elections. The two major alliances that entered the elections included secular, religious, and left-wing and right-wing parties. The CHP, which stands out with its emphasis on secularism and has negative resonance with religious voters, ran an extensive campaign to sanitise this image. There were female candidates with headscarves on the lists of almost every party. Hence, the 2023 elections represented an important milestone in decreasing the religious-secular tension in Türkiye.

Under these circumstances, although it did not carry its former ideological rigour, TİP revealed the populist side of its politics not by aligning itself with the values of the majority of the working class but by filling the secular playfield that the CHP had vacated. This move led to relative electoral success, but as shown above, it also created a paradox within working-class politics.

This aspect will be the biggest test for TİP. Will this party be able to make its voice heard in conservative working-class neighbourhoods? Will it be able to move away from identity politics or make peace with the other side? Many doubt TİP will depart from its traditional ideological position of TİP. The latter is stuck between being a party that reads politics from progressive lenses that are supposed to benefit the working class and its reactionary political stance, exemplified by imposing its "civilising" and "enlightening" mission on the lower classes.

As long as this dilemma persists, TİP will continue to be a marginal party that only appeals to nostalgic leftists among the upper class.

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