

HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

Masaryk University

Faculty

Faculty of Social Studies

Applicant

Dr. Pelin Ayan Musil

Habilitation thesis

Transformation of Islamist and Kurdish Parties in Turkey: Consequences for Regime Change

Reviewer

Prof. Yaprak Gürsoy

Reviewer's home unit, institution

European Institute, The London School of Economics and Political Science

Thank you for sharing Dr Pelin Ayan Musil's habilitation thesis, *The Transformation of Kurdish and Islamist Parties in Turkey: Consequences for Regime Change*. The thesis asks two interrelated questions. First, how did the AKP (Justice and Development Party) and the HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party) in Turkey --i.e. the Islamist and Kurdish parties respectively-- evolve to broaden their support base, leading to their successes in the elections of 2002, 2007 and 2015? Dr Ayan Musil argues that in contrast to their predecessors, these parties owned the issue of democracy against a repressive state, which allowed them to move beyond their limited religious and ethnic appeal to cover new and heterogenous segments of society. The second question of the book asks why Turkish democracy collapsed despite this issue ownership. The answer the thesis provides to this paradox is that owning democracy as an issue was a consequence of office-seeking behaviour, and not due to policy-seeking goals. Thus, in some respects, the parties used "democracy" to come to power and as a means rather than an end in itself.

In my view, the thesis demonstrates Dr Ayan Musil's academic expertise in comparative politics, party politics and Turkish politics, along with her excellent abilities to carry out innovative research that contributes to the candidate's field of expertise. In particular, I find the following aspects of the thesis particularly strong:

1. The book asks two interesting questions that show the candidate's critical thinking. The first question on the evolution of the political parties in Turkey is innovative because it draws attention to common elements in two parties that are rarely discussed in parallel to one another. By framing the question in terms of "electoral success," the question also shows a comprehensive understanding of rational party politics, going beyond mere ideological perspectives. The second question is a natural extension of the first argument and, in conjunction, helps situate Turkish regime change in a different dimension related to party politics. Indeed, this question allows the candidate to successfully combine the literatures on party politics and democratization by highlighting the former, rather than the latter as most scholars in the field do.

2. The book balances in-depth analysis of the transformation of two political parties in Turkey with a broad analysis of politics and democratization. The review of the literature on the case study is extensive. However, the broader literature pertaining to parties, elections, social movements and populism, was aptly used to explain the case. This balance between the general and the particular demonstrates the author's knowledge of political studies and skills in application of theories. It also demonstrates that the candidate can teach various political science courses at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels.
3. The book uses primary research of newspapers archives and interviews with party officials and activists. The interviews provide information on the motivations of the AKP and HDP members, including issue ownership, and brings to light information that had not been covered by other studies. Similar to the above point, the detailed primary research has been successfully balanced with the broader perspective, allowing for succinct and convincing arguments.
4. Finally, the book is written well. It does a superb job in communicating complex ideas to the reader, who might not know much about Turkish politics. The tables in Chapters 1 and 4 were particularly useful in summarizing the key points.

Given the above strengths of the thesis, I would recommend it to colleagues and students interested in Turkish politics and democratization studies. As Dr Ayan Musil is a well-known scholar of party politics in Turkish studies, I already use material from her earlier research in my lectures in a Master's level course at LSE. There is no doubt that the arguments expressed in this book would benefit me in my own research and teaching.

Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence (number of questions up to the reviewer)

Notwithstanding my overall positive assessment, my main question about the thesis is the generalisability of the findings. The candidate has refrained from expressing any views beyond Turkish politics. I find this puzzling as the general theoretical framework draws insights from various fields in political science. As a result, I would ask the following interrelated questions to the candidate:

1. How does your research contribute to our broader understanding of party politics and democratic backsliding?
2. Some of the assessments of the book (such as the HDP having different strategies locally and nationally, Turkey's EU candidacy, the military's role in politics etc.) sound unique to the Turkish context. Would we expect similar mechanisms to lead to comparable results in other contexts? Particularly, would issue ownership of democracy lead to similar electoral successes in other countries? If Turkish public's support for democracy is not sufficient, what leads countries to democratize?
3. In which contexts would the main arguments of the book hold? For example, can the main findings travel to democratic or authoritarian contexts? Given that Turkey was a semi-democratic country in 2007-2015, is this the general scope condition?

Additionally, I would ask the following three questions specific to Turkey:

1. How does the interactions between parties shape the context of electoral success and democratic backsliding? In other words, to what extent AKP's actions determined HDP's motivations and vice-versa? How about other parties, such as the main

opposition party, CHP (Republican People's Party)? The thesis briefly discusses the role of the MHP; could this be situated in a more general assessment of party politics in Turkey?

- a. The book emphasises agency, but when the interactions between different political parties are taken into account, would we also talk about the significance of structure?
2. The AKP has abandoned its democratization agenda, but it is still relatively successful in the elections. Thus, it sounds like there are other ways (or issues) that can create heterogenous electoral support. What are some of these issues?
3. Based on the past, what are the prospects of democratization in Turkey's future?

Conclusion

The habilitation thesis entitled "Transformation of Islamist and Kurdish Parties in Turkey: Consequences for Regime Change" by Dr. Pelin Ayan Musil **fulfils** requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Political Science.

Date: 10/01/2025

Signature

