Political Parties and Civil Society Organizations in Turkey: 
Mapping a multifaceted relationship

Introduction

One of the most significant discussions of global and local politics is about the political parties, civil society organizations (CSOs) and the relationship between them. The importance of this debate is becoming difficult to ignore, since political parties and CSOs are among the salient institutions that shape the character of the political system in most of the liberal democracies and serve as institutions that establish the primary linkages between citizens and governments. The fundamental intention of this article is to demonstrate and map this relationship within the Turkish setting.

A number of influential studies (Almond, 1958; Duverger, 1972; Lawson & Merkl, 1988) have attempted to assess the importance of the political parties and CSOs in that respect. Although these works are highly comprehensive and illuminating, they tend to analyse the political parties and CSOs on separate grounds with a limited reference to the relationship between them. More recently, however, there is an emergent literature on the concept which handles the issue in a more detailed perspective with alternative dimensions especially within the framework of democratization (Diamond, 1999; Diamond & Gunther, 2001; Morlino, 1998; Thomas, 2001).

This study will follow the latter pattern and utilize the dimensions of the democratization framework for analysis and seeks to address three basic features of this framework: (a) the type of activity that connects a party and CSOs; (b) the strength of the connection (how close or distant and how exclusive or inclusive) and (c) the dominance or direction of influence in the relationship. Although, on its own the democratization framework is not enough in explaining the problematic exhaustively, still it provides useful empirical tools. By manipulating these dimensions with innovative tools and alternative epistemological positions, it is possible to open up new opportunities for further research and enhance the current academic debate. This paper, hence, by utilizing the above mentioned framework will not only focus on the relationships happening at the macro (or political system) level, but also on the relationships that take place at the micro (or organization-to-organization) level.
Definitions and placing the discussion in the Turkish setting

Although a variety of definitions of political parties and CSOs have been provided by the academic literature, a comprehensive discussion of these definitions is not within the scope of this study. What is needed here, rather, is an operational definition of the concepts in question which will provide basis for empirical research. Hence, this study will utilize the following definition of civil society: an intermediate associational realm between state and family populated by organizations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state, and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests or values (White, 1994, p. 379). Similarly a political party is understood as an “organization that pursues the goal of placing its avowed representatives in government positions” (Janda, 1993, p. 166).

On Civil Society in Turkey

A number of students on Turkish political structure persuasively argued that there is an “omnipotent state” that shapes both the society and the political system within the Ottoman-Turkish continuum (Toros, 2007; Heper, 1985; Özbudun, 2000). However with the help of historical developments that took place especially after the transition to multiparty politics in 1946, spaces for associational activity and pluralist politics expanded against the Turkish state. According to Toprak (1996, pp. 90-91) the thirty year period between 1950 and 1980 was characterized by the struggles to set the systems for party politics and democratic procedures, guarantee the civil rights and legitimize the civil associations. Following these decades especially during 1980s, the relatively free environment created by economic liberal policies, affected the state society relationship in Turkey. The policies of economic liberalism first reduced the role of state within the economic sphere and following that these effects were spilled over to the cultural and social spheres and hence helped to the reformation of civil society in Turkey.

In consequence, discussions on civil society during 1990s revolved around notion’s relationship with other concepts like citizenship, secularism, liberal economic policies, voluntarism, consensus vs. conflict, and ethnicity and democratic maturation. Authors like Keyman and İçduygu (2003), focused on the formulation of citizenship in the Turkish context and underlined its characteristics as a product of the Kemalist modernization project. Since the Kemalist reforms foresaw a) a societal model based on homogeneity and uniformity and b) a
citizenship model based on duties rather than rights, the citizen as a subject of political inquiry evolved in a different way. Hence this approach highlights the defective character of citizenship in Turkey by referring to the connection of the citizen with the state. Since democracy and democratic amelioration necessitates autonomous individuals organized under civil societal organizations, this situation affected the development of civil society in Turkey in an atypical way.

Then again, the post 1980 era anatomized in an alternative way by a number of scholars. For example Navaro-Yasin (1998, p. 59) argues that the above-described developments took place only at the discourse level. According to him, after 1980 coup there was a need for a “space” which should “demonstrate” independent features from the state and accordingly state “discovered” the idea of civil society. By this way, state managed to produce and reproduce the official ideology outside of its own boundaries. Unquestionably, organizations that are concerned only with the fabrication of official ideology of state, might have limited chance for the development of democracy.

With a different perspective, Sarbay explains the expanded interest in civil society in Turkey with a rising demand for the establishment of western institutions for the sake of protection of the individual against state. Thus, civil society as one of these western institutions was perceived as a magic tool for democratization by every political formulation. Sarbay argues that this situation resulted in a new political attitude in Turkey that may be called as “civil societism” since the notion was practised without giving priority to the social and/or political reality depicted by it (Sarbay, 1998, p. 96). Hence the lip service paid to the civil society was not helpful at all for creating values like democracy, tolerance etc. under the dominance of Islamic social structures and/or dominant political ideologies.

Ersin Kalaycıoğlu focuses on another dimension of the subject in question and elaborates the “quality” of civil society organizations in Turkey. According to Kalaycıoğlu (1998, p. 121) since traditional orientations and unwritten practices became dominant during the post 1980 period, religious organizations like tarikats were accepted and diffused on a wider scale. Author labels this structure as “neopatrimonialism” which is a new form of patrimonialism, referring to a situation where strong primordial values triumphs over modern political structures with a strong state and weak civil society. Furthermore he refers to the rate of memberships to associations in Turkey and states that the 10 percent rate in Turkey is well under the levels of developed countries and concludes his arguments by referring to the problems related to the existence of
independent judiciary and neo-patrimonial political culture that hinders the development of strong civil society (Kalaycioğlu, 1998, p. 133).

From the expostulations above one may conclude that the formation of civil society in the Turkish context initiated on incongruous grounds resulting from both political and social systems. Nonetheless, this situation started to evolve intermittently especially with the modernization movement that took place in the late Ottoman and early republican period. The augmentation related to civil society continued and accelerated especially during the last two decades and civil society became an area of investigation. So the whole picture displays a duality where traditional structures and pressures on these structures co-exist together when civil society in Turkey is concerned.

- On Turkish Political Parties and Party System

It would not be wrong to argue that since from the early years of the republic, Turkish politics is heavily under the influence of political parties. Frey, while analysing the Turkish political structure during 1950s wrote that the Turkish politics, then being anything else, is party politics (Frey, 1965, pp. 301-303). One point to mention here is at its developmental phase, the dominant elitist character of Turkish politics started to influence the party formation and politics (Sayar, 1978, p. 41). During this initial stage, through the clientelist mechanisms the Turkish political parties were heavily shaped by the elite conflicts (Özbudun, 1981, pp. 258-265). When accompanied by continuous social change and unstable economic conditions, this tight grip of elites over the party politics endured and clientelism has become a prominent structural feature of Turkish party politics (Özbudun, 2001, p. 246).

Military interventions also influenced the developmental pattern of party politics in a great deal (Çarkoğlu, 1998, p. 546). Since habitual coups muddled the processes of political socialization of Turkish citizens, when party politics concerned, they resulted in high level of volatility among voters. Instead of stable and consistent party choices, short term interest based party preferences dominated the electoral history of Turkish politics (Kalaycioğlu, Ersin; Çarkoğlu, Ali, 2006, pp. 23-42). Besides volatility two other dominant characteristics is visible about the Turkish party politics: fragmentation and ideological polarization (Özbudun, 2001; Çarkoğlu, 1998; Özbudun, 1981).
Moreover, the Turkish political system displays a vivid ideological variety which affects the political parties of the country. Combined with the high degree of volatility central parties were swept away by voters in favour of more extremist parties with Islamic and nationalist agendas during the last two decades. Such kind of developments proves that the structural features of Turkish political parties reproduce themselves and continue to be salient.

One important comment on the Turkish party system beyond these characteristics came from Özbudun (2001, p. 260) stating that in Turkey, different than the European parties, political parties leaped from elite-based cadre party model to catch-all model without passing through a mass party phase. This seems quite important since, as I will discuss in detail below, the structural features of elite based clientelistic model is endured and became the main feature of Turkish political parties. This feature, while shaping the functioning of the political parties in Turkey today, also contours their relationship with civil society.

**Method and Sample**

Based on the above theoretical framework, qualitative research strategy was employed for the analysis of the problematic. Although a pre-defined framework was utilized, this skeleton was also used for the improvement of the frameworks mentioned within the literature. Hence, the research was still open to form an inductive view of the relationship between theory and research, whereby the former is generated by the latter. Additionally interpretivist epistemology meaning in the sense that the problematic was studied through an analysis of the interpretation of that world by its participants; and a constructionist ontological position was utilized which implies that social properties are outcomes of the interactions between individuals.

The data for this study was collected by semi-structured interviews that were carried out with party and CSO representatives. The field work was carried out during October, November and December 2008. The sample was a convenient one and consisted of 4 political party and 8 CSO representatives. As the sample for political parties, the ones that have more than 20 seats in Turkish Grand National Assembly were chosen (Justice and Development Party, Republican Peoples Party, Nationalist Action Party, and Democratic Society Party). According to the Turkish laws the parties that have more than 20 seats are allowed to form groups and send representatives to the legislative committees. Additionally the respondents within these political
parties were chosen among the MPs and executives who are responsible for party’s relations with CSOs. The sample for CSOs, on the other hand, looked for diversity and popularity. Accordingly 8 CSOs were chosen including business associations, human rights organizations, labor unions, occupational groups, religious umbrella organizations and issue-oriented associations. 6 out of 8 respondents of CSOs were chairpersons and the other two were members of the executive committees.

Each interview took around one hour. Although the interviews were guided by questions prepared in advance, the respondents were let free to add their opinions and additional comments. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the respondents and recordings were transcribed into computerized text files. All of the interview transcripts were read by the researcher and coded to the predefined categories of

(a) the type of activity that connects a party and a CSO;
(b) the strength of the connection (how close or distant and how exclusive or inclusive)
(c) the dominance or direction of influence in the relationship. (Occasional Paper Series, 2004)

Nvivo software package were used for coding and analysis.

**Findings**

*a. Type of Activity Connecting Political Parties and CSOs*

Below I will comment on the types of activities that connect political parties and CSOs in the Turkish setting. These activities were grouped under the headings of lobbying, information providing, training, CSOs as springboards, providing resources and voter mobilization.

**Lobbying:** One common activity of a CSO is to carry lobbying activities on political parties in order to raise its specific policy demands. While most of the CSOs advocate particular substantive issues only a few has the power to press on for legislation that directly affects political parties. The activities of CSOs mainly take place within the areas of electoral regulations, campaign finance reform, and decentralization.
When lobbying is concerned the respondents from political parties stated that frequently they face lobbying activities from CSOs. However they also state that distinct kind of CSOs, like business organizations, are more powerful in these activities. When the reasons for this situation were asked they put forward the organizational capabilities of these business organizations. At the same time, however, respondents also admitted that they have an inclination to refuse these group-specific activities since as political parties they tend to catch all interest rather than a specific group. Additionally if the lobbying activity spills out to the political sphere, rather than concentrating on specific policy areas, political parties usually do not take these demands into consideration. CSOs, on the other hand, display diversity on lobbying activities. Although all of the respondents accepted lobbying as one of the crucial mechanism for affecting policies, most of the time they perceive lobbying as an inefficient way to influence the political mechanism.

**Information providing:** Commonly CSOs, where suitable grounds available, provide information on issues and even policy position. Among the political parties researched, only respondent from Justice and Development Party stated that they have a policy to check the information provided by CSOs. This situation was also ratified by CSOs interviewed: 7 of 8 respondents complained about the apathy of political parties to their reports. (Only the CSO which is a business association stated that their opinions were frequently asked by governmental bodies). Another two important points appears up to be important from the findings. First one is related to the international dimension. The CSOs that work on the issues of human rights stated that their reports are taken more seriously at the international area than in Turkey. More interestingly, when their reports find place among the international publications, they add, suddenly the officials change their attitudes and try to refer to these reports in their policies. The second one is related to reports that focus on issues on micro administrative levels, like municipalities. The CSOs interviewed stated that local governments seem to be more respondent than the central government to the reports provided by CSOs. Other findings also support the idea that CSOs are more effective at local level than they are at the centre.

**Training:** During their contacts with political parties CSOs may provide training to political party members, candidates and activists on a variety of topics ranging from campaigning to legislative procedures. From the research data it is possible to conclude that the CSOs which, provide such kind of training, focus on the youth and women members of political parties rather than the executives. Additionally during the interviews none of the political parties refer to any
kind training activities provided by CSOs.

**CSOs as springboards:** Sometimes, CSOs may produce opportunities for individuals who want to become party candidates, or vice-versa they may provide a temporary home for out-of-office politicians. In countries like Turkey where political parties are hierarchically organized or advancement through political parties is limited, CSOs may serve as centres for “mobility formation” for politically ambitious candidates. When asked, all of the respondents from political parties approved “utilizing” the CSOs as springboards. Indeed, in Turkey it is quite common to see the former CSO representatives as MPs. The CSO representatives interviewed, on the other hand, disapprove this attitude and complained about the former CSO executives who were elected as MPs. They blamed the former CSO executives for forgetting the place that once they were and ignoring the demands of civil society after the elections. This point seems quite important and will be dealt in detail in the discussion section below.

**Resources:** CSOs may provide direct and indirect resources to a party behind the closed doors and beyond exposure, in exchange for a promise of party support. These include endorsement, money, and materials and alike. The party representatives interviewed, confessed that they use the resources of civil society organizations but they neither detailed the quality nor quantity of the help they receive.

CSO representatives displayed a similar attitude and stated that their organization does not provide support to political parties in that sense but some others do. So although accepting such kind of a connection CSO representatives tend to externalize this connection.

**Voter mobilization:** CSOs may mobilize voters for political parties. Once a CSO has backed a political party, it may, for example, hold internal meetings at which members are encouraged to get out the vote for that party. Groups can also maintain and mobilize voters between elections by providing services to constituents on behalf of political parties.

It seems that this function is important for political parties. All of the party representatives mentioned that, they especially concentrate on women and youth for voter mobilization and gave special importance to this connection. CSOs, on the other hand, declared different positions on this issue. Although some of them ban their members to be active in that
sense within the CSOs, some openly declare the support for a particular political party.

\[b. \text{The Closeness and Exclusiveness of Relationships}\]

The closeness of the relationship between CSOs and political parties and its density also seems to be an important variable for the issue in question. Some CSOs may choose not to be involved in politics. This may be due to the activity area of CSOs which does not require any kind of political action. However, some others although engage in political activities, may still refrain from setting close contact with political parties. By this way they will be freed from being marked as “partisan groups” and accordingly avoid from acting within the area of “dirty politics.”

When political parties concerned it seems that although they want to utilize the sources of CSOs, they have a tendency to keep them away from the decision making processes. CSOs seem more demanding on this issue. Although they want to keep their independence, at the same time they want to be more effective in policy making. They perceive the issue of independence as the vital characteristic of a CSO. This position is valid for all CSOs interviewed regardless of their organizational types and issues.

\[c. \text{The course of influence}\]

Not but not least the direction/course of influence appears up to be an important variable within the relationship in question. Political parties may be more under the influence of some CSOs than others depending mainly on the political setting. Thus business or farmers groups may be more influential than women’s, consumers’ or environmentalist groups. Similarly, within one type of CSO, like unions, some groups may be more autonomous of political parties than others, even within one country. The party may also be more powerful than any interest group.

The Turkish case suggests the latter position. It seems that political parties in Turkey have an inclination to have a “pressure-free” environment, where they can utilize the civil society organizations but not be affected by them. Instead of perceiving CSOs as partners in the decision making process political parties in Turkey try to dominate and exploit the resources produced by the CSOs.
CSO representatives produced similar comments and underlined the desire of political parties to influence the internal mechanisms of CSOs, especially the election processes. However, CSO representatives also mentioned nowadays this desire of political parties is not welcomed by the CSOs, and most of them prefer to establish a distant relationship with all of the political parties. By this way, they hope, the established course of relationship from political parties will be reversed.

**Discussion**

The findings suggest that, while defining their relationship among them political parties and CSOs in Turkey produce alternative perceptions. Below I will suggest that these alternative perceptions are the result of both structural features of Turkish politics and recent pressures on this system.

As referred in the introduction, among others, one of the key concepts that is useful for understanding the Turkish party politics, has always been clientelism. Basically, clientelism is a form of two-way exchange, which is typically characterized by a sense of “uncomfortable responsibility”, and asymmetrical power relations between the ones involved (Roniger, 1994; Piattoni, 2001). The basics of this asymmetric relationship rest on both client and patron, where client reciprocates the support of patron with a combination of economic goods and services and social acts of deference and loyalty (Mason, 1986, p. 489). Based on these definitions studies after 1960s have suggested the emergence of a ‘new clientelism’ (Weingrod, 1968), in which political behaviour is still characterized by patterns of exchange, but in an alternative way. Geographical mobility, rapid urbanization, increased levels of education, industrial development weakened traditional patron-client ties, which opened up the way for new forms of exchange. As a result organized political parties, with their bureaucratized mechanisms, replaced the traditional structure. For explaining this change in the Turkish context, an illuminating case study was provided by Güneş-Ayata (1994, pp. 49-63) where author focuses on the evolution of the traditional dyadic form of patron client relationship to clientelistic brokerage type carried by political parties. Grasping the discussion from this point, I would suggest a new term, **civil clientelism**, as the new form of the concept, which, I think, may be useful for understanding the relations of political parties with civil society in Turkey. Below I will try to formulize the components of the term **civil clientelism**.
Above-mentioned findings suggest that political parties in Turkey, when their relationship with CSOs concerned, mainly prioritize the issues that are related to electoral activities. As mentioned above, approval and common usage of CSOs as springboards and utilizing their resources for reaching to segments of society by political parties supports this argument. Interestingly, however, political parties in Turkey prefer to carry such kind of partnership in unformal/traditional manners. When their relationship with CSOs questioned on electoral matters, one party representative stated that:

“I cannot openly answer that question but I can say that there is no political party in Turkey which do not receive such kind of support. However it will not be appropriate to reveal the names of the organizations here...”

In Turkey during the 1970s party organizations worked among the new ethnic, occupational and neighbourhood communities that were formed in the cities in order to reproduce the previously created patron-client links. (Güneş-Ayata, 1994, p. 55). As these communities organized in alternative ways and transferred themselves into CSOs during the years, they have become the new vote-banks and/or brokerage agents of political parties. Currently CSOs seems as a fruitful arena for political parties for the establishment and reproduction of these new patron client links.

This is due to a number of structural factors of political parties and civil society in Turkey. As mentioned in the introduction, in Turkey political parties during their evolution from cadre party model to catch-all party model did not experience the mass party phase (Özbudun, 2001, p. 250). The mass parties that are characterized by large base of members which are both active during and intra-election periods try to penetrate a number of spheres of social life mainly through organized interests (Diamond & Gunther, 2001, p. 16). The absence of this phase contributed to the lingering of vertical clientelistic networks and machine-type politics which explains the lack of horizontal loyalties of political parties in Turkey (Özbudun, 2001, p. 246). Political parties instead of trying to establish the horizontal ties with civil society, preferred to stay autonomous from civil society. Research findings also confirm this stance. Political party representatives responded to the related questions as follows:

“CSOs may only be manipulative in politics, but not decisive.... Acting completely together with CSOs will lead us to the chaos that Turkey has experienced during 1970s.”
“Today CSOs in Turkey have problems related to reliability... Cooperation is possible but it has to be in a limited manner”

“CSOs in Turkey have a tendency to involve in politics more than the desired level. Surely this is not acceptable. Although they are important in producing ideas about their expertise area, they should remain within this sphere instead of involving in politics.”

At this point it may be fruitful to check the features of civil society in Turkey in order to search its linkages with civil clientelism and support my argument. One argument on civil society in Turkey aptly states that CSOs in Turkey based themselves on mutual trust and interpersonal obligation rather than on individualistic contractual memberships (White J., 2002). Thus the structure of civil society in Turkey does not reflect the “ideal type” civil society which is an active stakeholder of politics based on group interests. On the contrary, because of this structural feature, CSOs have always been among the arenas suitable for producing and reproducing the clientelistic features.

Within that framework, not surprisingly for CSOs connections with political parties are perceived as valuable chances to reach and control the state resources. Thus, CSOs’ leaders and/or candidates do not hesitate to display their connection with political parties, especially when these parties are represented at the national assembly. CSO representatives interviewed stated the following ideas related to this point:

“All of the political parties directly involve in the electoral processes of CSOs. They do lobbying within CSOs and spend money where necessary”

“They (political parties) attend to the meetings of CSOs when it is related with elections. Usually they don’t. But when it is related to election they attend to the meetings for displaying their support to particular candidates so that in return they can reach to the members of the CSOs.

The connection mentioned above, however, rarely works in favour of the CSOs as political clients. Once these resources are under control, parties and “adopted leaders” of CSOs have a tendency to neglect the interests of their clientele. This practice was also vocalized by the CSO representatives interviewed:
“We have MPs who were once members of CSOs, both from right and left. But once they are elected, they think that their responsibility, as a CSO representative, ends. But this has to be reversed: Since this MP knows the problems and solutions better than anyone else, s/he has to work harder.”

Hence from the discussion above it will not be wrong to conclude that political parties in Turkey today have a tendency to sustain their established clientelist tradition by utilizing the channels that are offered by CSOs. This disposition may be categorized under the term civil clientelism, where political parties perceive CSOs as by-organizations in order to reach the voters and prioritize only the electoral activities CSOs’. At the same time they are reluctant to establish horizontal ties with CSOs where CSOs are perceived as shareholders of democratic process.

However above conclusion does not reflect the whole picture. Beyond the findings mentioned in the previous paragraphs related to political parties, this research also highlighted a number of interesting points about CSOs in Turkey. Although surrounded by traditional structural features, it seems that Turkish CSOs at the same time search alternative ways of being more effective within the decision making processes. This search seems in accord with the project of “critical scepticism” of post-modern era where the central, state-centred and one-dimensional solutions for global problems are criticized (Keyman, 2000). In accordance with that, starting especially by late 1990s, CSOs are being active especially in a number of areas in Turkey. To start with, by acting as agenda-setters and by trying to initiate policies, civil society organizations in Turkey raise the issues that the governing elites try to avoid. Especially during 1990s, civil society in Turkey was clearly successful in raising issues such as human rights problems onto the political agenda by publishing reports. On this subject one CSO representative stated that:

“Rather than local authorities our reports are taken seriously especially by international organizations like the EU.”

Indeed, in Turkey CSOs became more and more visible through their reports. This is quite important since based on this proposition it may be argued that, although indirectly, CSOs in Turkey started to act as agenda setters. Moreover, by working as a government counterpart, civil society injects its experience into policy areas such as health, education, and housing. Civil society organizations, compared to state bodies, have a greater chance of being more efficient; have more knowledge; and have better local contacts. Additionally, by being a source of education, a number of civil society organizations in Turkey are involved in the project of educating the citizens
in different areas. The educational function of civil society is especially significant since through this channel, democratic values and ideas find ways to establish themselves among the citizens. Last but not least, by being a source for new political alternatives, civil society organizations that have the aim of triggering new political movements and identifying the potential leaders have become increasingly visible in Turkey (Toros, 2007).

**Conclusion**

After 1990s although Turkey started to have a comparatively strong and independent civil society than it previously enjoyed, CSOs in Turkey still remain relatively weak and has developed far less than hoped or expected when compared to European counterparts. In that framework, political parties have an important share. Political parties instead of perceiving CSOs as equals within the sphere of politics, tend to sustain and reproduce their traditional structures based on clientelism. While doing so they adopt themselves to new tools and mechanisms which may be conceptualized under the term of civil-clientelism. By this way it would not be wrong to argue that their contribution to the development of civil society is very limited in the Turkish context when the ideal definition of civil society is concerned. However there is still room to be optimistic about the civil society in Turkey. Although in a limited manner they manage to influence the sphere of politics by a number of activities including publication of reports and education providing.

**Bibliography**


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Mapping a multifaceted relationship
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