

Cooperative Autocrats: An Account of Authoritarian Pre-
Electoral Alliances and Power Sharing Through the People's
Alliance in Türkiye

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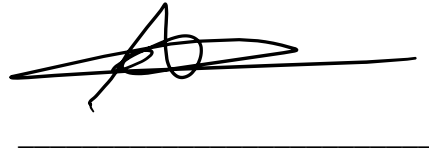
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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, Alp Can Eren, candidate for the MA degree in Political Science, declare that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'A' followed by a circular flourish and a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Signature

ABSTRACT

Pre-electoral alliances in authoritarian regimes are not uncommon yet fairly under-researched by political scientists. This thesis seeks to rectify this gap in the literature by providing readers with a qualitative and descriptive account of the People's Alliance, the pre-electoral and legislative coalition that has been governing Türkiye since 2018. By utilizing a diverse array of news articles, party manifestos, alliance protocols, and statements by politicians, the present thesis aims to show what preceded the formation of the People's Alliance and the different ways in which the alliance's constituent parties have cooperated with one another. Two important antecedents to the formation of the People's Alliance that are identified in this thesis are ideological confluence and formative cooperation. Additionally, the findings of this thesis indicate that parties within authoritarian pre-electoral alliances often do not cooperate because of concerns about party prestige and independence.

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

Authoritarian regimes, although heavily associated with the figure of a singular autocrat, are often governed by coalitions. For the purposes of this thesis, these coalitions can be of two kinds. The first kind is coalitions between different social groups such as the military and the oligarchy. The second kind is coalitions between political parties.¹ Although scholars of authoritarianism have written extensively on the former type of coalitions, few has been written on “authoritarian multiparty governments (AMGs)” and authoritarian pre-electoral alliances (APECs) (Bokobza and Nyrup 2024).² Yet authoritarian multiparty governments are not rare occurrences, and “in 2020, almost 50% of all authoritarian regimes had more than one party in government” (Bokobza and Nyrup 2024, 3). There is an unfortunate discrepancy between the ubiquity of AMGs and APECs, and the number of academic studies that have been conducted on these phenomena.

One of my goals in this thesis is to delve further into this fairly common yet very under-researched phenomena of APECs and AMGs. I aim to help rectify the previous neglect of AMGs and APECs by providing a descriptive account of the People’s Alliance (*Cumhur İttifakı*), a pre-electoral and legislative coalition between Türkiye’s Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP)) and the Nationalist Movement/Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* (MHP)). Although I do not offer readers a “generalizable” descriptive argument (Gerring 2012, 725), my hope is that an account of the People’s Alliance can demonstrate the importance of analyzing AMGs and APECs while also shining a light on potential paths for future research.

¹ As some readers might notice, these two kinds/types of coalitions in authoritarian regimes are distinct yet not mutually exclusive. For example, an authoritarian regime might be governed by a coalition government supported by a coalition between military officers and the business elite.

² I use pre-electoral alliance and pre-electoral coalition interchangeably. Additionally, the term APEC as I use it indicates only pro-government electoral alliances in authoritarian regimes. Pro-authoritarianism pre-electoral alliances in democracies are not covered by my term.

By showing how the People's Alliance was formed and how its constituent parties cooperate, I also seek to bridge the gap between the pre-electoral alliance and authoritarian power sharing literatures. Both of these literatures largely ignore APECs and AMGs, with no explicitly given explanations as to why. This ignorance is puzzling, especially considering how APECs and AMGs could be considered simultaneously as pre-electoral alliances and authoritarian power sharing arrangements. As such, APECs and AMGs can best be analyzed by utilizing both of the relevant literatures. Furthermore, both the pre-electoral alliance and authoritarian power sharing literatures would likely be enriched by an attempt to synthesize the two, such as this thesis.

The key questions I ask in this thesis are: What has preceded the formation of the People's Alliance, and what types of cooperation have the alliance's constituent parties engaged in? Continuing the work of scholars who have written on authoritarian power sharing and pre-electoral alliances, I identify two important antecedents of the formation of the People's Alliance. The first is that the AKP got ideologically closer to the MHP before the two parties formed an alliance with one another. I label this antecedent as ideological confluence. The second antecedent I identify, labeled as formative cooperation, is that the MHP and the AKP cooperated before the People's Alliance was formed.³ Ideological confluence and formative cooperation are the two major antecedents of the People's Alliance that I identify in my thesis.

Although I give most of my attention in this thesis to what has preceded the People's Alliance, I have also devoted a chapter to the cooperative relationships between the AKP and the MHP after the People's Alliance was formed. I particularly write about the discussions between the AKP and the MHP on the creation of joint electoral lists and the withdrawal of

³ I am not making a causal argument when I label this antecedent as formative.

candidates. The picture that emerges from my examination is one of continuous bargaining between the two parties, a process that has often led to suboptimal outcomes for the alliance.

This thesis is structured as follows: First is the theoretical section, where I introduce the majority of the key concepts of my thesis and briefly review the relevant scholarly work. I additionally highlight some of the shortcomings of this previous work and underline how an analysis of the People's Alliance can begin to rectify these shortcomings. The next chapter is an introduction to the People's Alliance and its main actors. The third chapter is on the cooperative relationships between the MHP and the AKP. The first subchapter of the this section is on the end of the dominant party system in Türkiye, followed by subchapters on ideological confluence, formative cooperation, and cooperation post-alliance formation. The fourth chapter is the conclusion of my thesis, where I acknowledge some of the limitations of my work and suggest avenues for future research.

CHAPTER 2 - THE ARGUMENT'S THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

As a competitive authoritarian regime (Esen, Gümüşçü, and Yavuzılmaz 2023), combining ‘democratic’ institutions like national multiparty elections with authoritarian practices, Türkiye is situated in an ambiguous conceptual space between “closed authoritarian regimes” and “electoral democracies” (Schedler 2013). Thus, it follows that to understand Türkiye’s politics, one would do well to examine literature written on both democratic and authoritarian regimes. In the following section, I do this through a comparative evaluation of the scholarly work written on pre-electoral alliances and authoritarian power sharing arrangements.

A scholar of pre-electoral coalitions in authoritarian regimes can quickly notice that although both the literature on pre-electoral coalitions in democracies and authoritarian power sharing can contribute to one’s understanding of the subject, neither literature acknowledges the contributions made by the other. With the notable exception of Gandhi and Reuter’s article on pre-electoral alliances in non-democratic regimes (Gandhi and Reuter 2013), most of the work written on pre-electoral alliances focus on democracies, specifically parliamentary democracies (Spoon and West 2015, 394). Unfortunately, much of what is written on authoritarian power sharing also suffers from a narrow focus. Although scholars have mentioned plethora of institutions as facilitators of authoritarian power sharing, such as political parties and elections (Magaloni 2008, 718), pre-electoral coalitions have yet to be seriously considered as organizations relevant to the relationship between autocrats and their potential challengers. There is not much that can justify such neglect. In 2013, Gandhi and Reuter lamented that political scientists did not know much about how “‘ordinary’ electoral strategies and party competition” functioned in non-democratic regimes (Gandhi and Reuter 2013, 138). More than a decade later, political science has still not rectified this gap in knowledge. Thus, my descriptive account of Türkiye’s People’s Alliance aims to help mend

the gap between the pre-electoral alliance and authoritarian power sharing literatures, all the while demonstrating that coalitions such as the People's Alliance are worth delving into.

In the following chapter, I provide a brief survey of the academic work written on pre-electoral coalitions and authoritarian power sharing that are relevant for this thesis. I also define some key concepts for the thesis such as competitive authoritarianism and autocracy. My goal is to provide the reader with the literature needed to understand the People's Alliance and eliminate any potential conceptual misgivings.

2.1 Türkiye as an Authoritarian, but Not Autocratic, Regime

Throughout this thesis, I differentiate between autocratic and authoritarian regimes. Like most concepts in political science, authoritarian regime and autocratic regime have been used differently by various scholars. Some have chosen to use the two interchangeably. Yet, for the purposes of emphasizing the power sharing dynamics within the People's Alliance, I find it important to treat the two terms as related yet different concepts. In this thesis, autocratic regimes indicate those in which the vast majority of political power has been concentrated within the hands of a singular leader, i.e. the autocrat. Dissimilarly, authoritarian regimes are those in which an autocrat has significant power in his hands yet nevertheless needs to share this power with other actors in order to remain in his position.⁴ Türkiye is an authoritarian regime, with its autocrat Erdoğan having to share power with political actors such as the MHP.

Although there seems to be no definitive research conducted to show the prevalence of power sharing in regimes with autocrats, scholars of authoritarianism seem to have accepted that most autocrats necessarily share their power to maintain their positions (Meng, Paine, and Powell 2023, 154). Yet, while most academics have seemingly reached a consensus on the importance of authoritarian power sharing, no such agreement has been attained when it comes

⁴ Whether or not these two terms can be put on a sliding scale, or if one is a subset of the other, I leave up to scholars with more experience in concept formation.

to defining this important term. Earlier research, exemplified by Svolik's 2009 article, has focused on the distribution of spoils by the autocrat to his potential challengers (Svolik 2009). More recent work, however, has underlined an additional necessity of a reallocation of power (Magaloni 2008, 200; Meng and Paine 2022; Meng, Paine, and Powell 2023). Therefore, agreeing with Meng, Paine and Powell, I define authoritarian power sharing as the distribution of spoils and the reallocation of power between an authoritarian leader and his supporters/potential challengers (Meng, Paine, and Powell 2023).

Türkiye is not an autocratic regime but an authoritarian one. That is, Erdoğan needs to share power in order to stay in power. I provide the reader with more supporting evidence of this statement in the subsequent chapters of my thesis, but for now it is useful to underline that in Türkiye, not all power is concentrated in the hands of Erdoğan. While a lot of Türkiye experts have defined the country as an autocratic and neopatrimonial regime ruled by Erdoğan and his dominant party, scholars have recently begun to notice that Erdoğan shares his power with many important political actors.

As just mentioned, most of the work written on Türkiye's autocratization in these past two decades have characterized the country as a neopatrimonial autocracy ruled by an autocrat and his dominant party. In their *The AKP After 15 Years* (2018), İ. Yılmaz and Bashirov argue that Türkiye's emerging political regime can best be captured by the term "Erdoğanism" (İ. Yılmaz and Bashirov 2018). According to these authors, Erdoğanist regimes combine elements electoral authoritarian, neopatrimonial, Islamist and populist regimes (İ. Yılmaz and Bashirov 2018, 1813). More importantly for the purposes of this thesis, Erdoğanist regimes are personalistic and quasi-sultanistic (İ. Yılmaz and Bashirov 2018, 1814). That is, Türkiye's regime has supposedly underwent "extreme personalization" to the extent that Erdoğan and the country's fates have become one and the same (İ. Yılmaz and Bashirov 2018, 1814). There is no power sharing in this portrayal of Türkiye, only a distribution of spoils by Erdoğan to others

in exchange for submission (İ. Yılmaz and Bashirov 2018, 1819). As can be inferred from my brief description of their argument, İ. Yılmaz and Bashirov conceptualize Türkiye's regime as an autocratic one that revolves around Erdoğan.

Although not going to the extremes that would make one label Türkiye's regime after its autocrat, other scholars have also overwhelmingly emphasized Erdoğan and his party's dominance in Türkiye's politics. Keyman, in his *The AK Party* (2014), argues that the AKP has been slowly attaining dominance since the party's participation in the 2002 parliamentary elections and has attained "electoral hegemony" (Keyman 2014, 23). Furthermore, the author suggests that AKP's electoral hegemony, meaning that the party has ruled Türkiye without a strong opposition party, has allowed it to assert its dominance over the judiciary (Keyman 2014, 23, 27). Ayan Musil, like Keyman, has also argued that under the AKP, Türkiye has developed a dominant party system (Ayan Musil 2015). The literature which focuses on dominant political parties have unsurprisingly emphasized the AKP's central role to Türkiye's many changes, including autocratization. And just like those articles which show Türkiye's regime as a neopatrimonial or Erdoğanist one, the articles which argue that the AKP is a dominant party have tended to portray Türkiye as an autocratic rather than an authoritarian regime. Put differently, the literature has not paid attention to the power sharing arrangements in Türkiye.

I do not intend to argue against those scholars who have portrayed the AKP as a dominant party. Instead, I propose that while the AKP might have been a dominant party at some point in Türkiye's history, this dominance no longer characterizes the country's regime. The party can no longer control the country's legislature by itself and has to cooperate with other parties to fulfill its goals. Further in my thesis I suggest that the end of this dominance can be traced back to the June 2015 parliamentary elections. Here, I wish to underline my

previous claim that Türkiye should be classified as having an authoritarian regime rather than an autocratic one.

Only the most recent of works written on Türkiye have begun emphasizing that the AKP has been sharing its power with the MHP. Ayan Musil has stated that since the party has failed to gain enough votes to form a single-party government in the June 2015 elections, the AKP has pursued a strategy of authoritarian power sharing with the MHP (Ayan Musil 2024, 2). As the author demonstrates in *How Incumbents Create Uneven Patterns of Competition During Autocratization* (2024), what briefly ended AKP's dominance in June 2015 was the rise of the Turkish and Kurdish nationalist parties in the form of the MHP and the People's Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi* (HDP)) (Ayan Musil 2024, 8–9).⁵ After having its electoral and parliamentary hegemony challenged by these two parties, AKP and Erdoğan chose to share power with the MHP in order to stay in power (Ayan Musil 2024, 10). And as Ayan Musil states, the political system of Türkiye, especially after the switch to presidentialism in 2017, began to revolve around pre-electoral coalitions rather than individual political parties (Ayan Musil 2024, 15). Such an arrangement has increased the MHP's power and made the AKP vulnerable to its pressures (Ayan Musil 2024, 15). Thus, although Erdoğan's personal impact on the country is still highly present, Türkiye has been co-ruled by a power sharing pre-electoral coalition between the AKP and the MHP since the 2018 elections. The country's regime is authoritarian but cannot be classified as autocratic due to this power sharing arrangement.

2.2 Authoritarian Power Sharing Through the People's Alliance

In authoritarian regimes, autocrats and their 'partners' are plagued by difficult commitment and trust issues. Even though many scholars have written on these issues,

⁵ AKP was able to temporarily regain its dominance in the repeat November 2015 elections.

Magaloni is the one who has provided the world with a simple name for it all: “the dictator’s dilemma” (Magaloni 2008, 720). In this dilemma, the dictator/autocrat needs to choose between whether or not to commit to the promises they made to their partners. On the one hand, the autocrat might not want to commit to the power sharing arrangement because they want to preserve their power and maximize their rents at the cost of potential future uprisings (Meng, Paine, and Powell 2023, 166). The autocrat is theorized to choose to not commit when their potential partners are weak and cannot credibly threaten to punish (Meng, Paine, and Powell 2023, 164). On the other hand, the autocrat might want to commit to the power sharing and delegate some of his power to the other actors to increase their survivability at the expense of their share of the spoils (Magaloni 2008, 715). Additionally, while power sharing with other political parties might increase an autocrat’s survivability, this might come at the cost of ideological dilution and cadre discipline (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018, 58). Whether to share power is not an easy decision for an autocrat.

A similar dilemma is faced by the potential partners of an autocrat. This I have labeled a dilemma of cooperation. The potential partner has to make, just like the autocrat, a choice between whether to cooperate or not. Cooperation can give a potential partner access to the autocrat’s spoils and networks, positions within the government, and policy influence (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018, 90). However, just like for the autocrat, cooperation might also dilute the potential partner’s ideology and even cause it to lose its organizational identity and fully get coopted by the autocrat. Authoritarian regimes pose difficult decisions for not only the autocrat, but also other political actors who have the potential to join the autocrat’s coalition.

Institutional and more ‘actor-centric’ factors influence which decisions the autocrat and their potential partners take when it comes to commitment. Many scholars have proposed that authoritarian coalitions can solve commitment issues through the autocrat delegating more of his power. The formal institutions that such power would be delegated through have ranged

from political parties (Magaloni 2008, 716), to regularly held elections and term limits (Meng, Paine, and Powell 2023, 158). However, as Boix and Svolik have pointed out, one has no reason to limit analysis to only these institutions (Boix and Svolik 2013, 93). It is equally feasible to suggest that pre-electoral alliances can also be analyzed as formal institutions in which autocrats delegate power to other political actors.

Institutions are not the only factors that scholars have sought to prove affect the stability of authoritarian power sharing arrangements. The potential partners' power to coerce the autocrat is also highly important. Coercion has mostly been thought of in the literature as violent rebellion or the withdrawal of resources such as manpower (Boix and Svolik 2013; Meng, Paine, and Powell 2023). This focus hints at a possible bias in the literature towards closed authoritarian regimes rather than electoral ones, as most electoral ways to coerce the autocrat are seemingly ignored by scholars of authoritarian power sharing.

Keeping in mind that in many competitive authoritarian regimes electoral processes can enable political actors to threaten and punish the autocrat non-violently, I propose that many electoral paths to coercion have been under-researched. Some researchers have proposed 'walking away' from a pre-electoral coalition as a possible tool of coercion by the partners of an autocrat (Albala, Borges, and Couto 2023, 67). Other ways to coerce the autocrat might be to lessen cooperation in campaigning or publicly contradicting the autocrat to lessen his credibility in the eyes of the voters.

The MHP does not need to have the power or intention to stage a rebellion in order to credibly coerce and punish the AKP. Once one considers the possibility of more 'electoral' paths of coercion, one can find it easier to think of the People's Alliance as an authoritarian power sharing arrangement. After all, as I argue further in this thesis, the MHP not only helps provide the AKP with ideological support but also cooperates with the party in many ways that can benefit Erdoğan. Withholding of such cooperation can arguably be seen as a functional

coercion mechanism in the People's Alliance. The People's Alliance has the coercion mechanisms necessary for many to consider the party as an authoritarian power sharing arrangement.

Some scholars have put undue importance on the higher-most positions in the government when looking at authoritarian power sharing. Namely, when defining AMGs, Bokobza and Nyrup have included only those authoritarian governments in which all coalition partners have some members in the executive cabinet (Bokobza and Nyrup 2024). By this definition, the People's Alliance is not an AMG. This is because since the formation of the People's Alliance and Türkiye's transition to a presidential republic, all members of Erdoğan's cabinet have either been independents or AKP members (Nyrup and Bramwell 2020). No MHP member has ever served on a cabinet of Erdoğan. Yet while this might initially seem like proof that the MHP is a satellite of the AKP and that there is no real power sharing in Türkiye, there is good evidence that shows that this is not the case. Specifically, pursuing high-level positions in the ministries instead of cabinet seats seems to have been a conscious strategy of the MHP (Gökdemir 2018). Thus, power seems to have been shared between the AKP and the MHP at the sub-ministerial level rather than on the cabinet level. The relationship between the AKP and the MHP cannot be confidently stated as a non-power sharing relationship.

2.3 Electoral and Competitive Authoritarianism

Political regimes are institutions that structure how executive and legislative leaders are chosen (Howard and Roessler 2006, 366). Therefore, one can expect political actors to behave differently in different regimes and when facing differing rules (Schedler 2013, 77). It follows that to better analyze how the People's Alliance and its constituent parties act, one must conduct a preliminary examination of Türkiye's political regime: Competitive authoritarianism.

As Schedler argues in *The Menu of Manipulation* (2002), competitive authoritarianism is a subtype of electoral authoritarianism (Schedler 2002, 47).⁶ Thus, to define competitive authoritarianism and better understand Türkiye as a competitive authoritarian regime, one must define electoral authoritarianism. Like many concepts in political science, electoral authoritarianism can be defined differently by different scholars. In this thesis, I use electoral authoritarianism to indicate an authoritarian regime where executive and legislative leaders are determined through regular multiparty elections (Schedler 2006, 3).

Electoral authoritarianism is distinct both from democracy and non-electoral/closed authoritarianism. Electoral authoritarian regimes are like democracies in that they use elections to determine leaders, yet differ from democracies in that these elections are neither free nor fair (Schedler 2013, 78). Similarly, electoral authoritarian regimes are authoritarian like their closed counterparts, but the two regime types differ from each other since closed authoritarian regimes do not have multiparty elections that determine national executive and legislative leaders (Schedler 2013, 78). Electoral authoritarianism is thus a unique regime type with distinct constraints that structure the behavior of political actors.

Electoral authoritarianism proliferated across the world during the “third wave of democratization” (Huntington 1991, 12), especially in the years following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. During the third wave of democratization, between 1974 and 1990, the global number of democracies approximately doubled (Huntington 1991, 12). However, the third wave of democratization was accompanied by an increasing amount of electoral authoritarian regimes (Diamond 2002, 27).⁷ Many of the closed authoritarian regimes

⁶ I am aware that there are other ways to conceptualize electoral authoritarianism and its relationship with competitive authoritarianism (Morse 2012). However, this thesis’ scope does not extend to resolving the debate on how to define electoral and competitive authoritarianism.

⁷ Diamond prefers to use the term “pseudodemocracy” instead of electoral authoritarianism, but indicates that the two terms are roughly interchangeable (Diamond 2002, 24).

that collapsed during the third wave of democratization have not become democracies but have transformed into electoral authoritarian regimes (Schedler 2002, 37).

The spread of electoral authoritarianism seems to have outlived Huntington's third wave, despite scholarly debate on whether or not one can now speak of a "third wave of autocratization" (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019).⁸ Regardless of the existence of an authoritarian third wave, scholars like Bermeo have shown that an increasing number of authoritarian leaders have resorted to "executive aggrandizement" and electoral manipulation, rather than 'more closed' democratic backsliding methods such as coup d'états, to subvert democracy (Bermeo 2016).

As electoral authoritarian regimes have become more numerous, closed authoritarian regimes have gotten less and less common (Diamond 2002, 26). The vast majority of regimes today, including authoritarian regimes, hold multiparty elections (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009, 404), and electoral authoritarianism has become the most common type of non-democratic regime in the world (Schedler 2013, 1). Thus, even in authoritarian regimes elections have become "the only game in town" (Bermeo 2016, 15). To understand contemporary authoritarianism, one must understand electoral authoritarianism.

Competitive authoritarianism is a subtype of electoral authoritarianism. Electoral authoritarian regimes can be divided into two distinct categories: Hegemonic electoral authoritarian regimes and competitive electoral authoritarian regimes (Diamond 2002, 25; Schedler 2002, 47).⁹ Thinking of electoral authoritarianism as a family resemblances concept (Barrenechea and Castillo 2019), one can argue that all electoral authoritarian regimes have unfair regular elections that select national leaders, but the subtypes differ from one another

⁸ Readers might find it interesting to note that according to Lührmann and Lindberg, the third wave of autocratization began in 1994 (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, 8), only four years after Huntington's third wave of democratization ended (Huntington 1991, 12).

⁹ I use hegemonic electoral authoritarianism and hegemonic authoritarianism interchangeably throughout this thesis. Similarly, competitive electoral authoritarianism and competitive authoritarianism are both used to indicate the same regime type.

when it comes to competitiveness (Morse 2012, 172). Similarly, one can conceptualize the difference between hegemonic and competitive authoritarianism as a difference in autocratic consolidation (Schedler 2013, 12).

Hegemonic authoritarian regimes are consolidated electoral authoritarian regimes where the opposition is highly restricted, the leaders get elected by large percentages, and elections are mere window dressing for the representation and reproduction of power (Schedler 2002, 47).¹⁰ Thus, a hegemonic authoritarian regime is a “de facto one-party state” (Howard and Roessler 2006, 367) Notwithstanding arguments that portray an election in itself as having a democratizing effect on authoritarian regimes (Donno 2013; Lindberg 2009), one can state that elections in hegemonic authoritarian regimes mainly exist to reinforce authoritarian leaders.

Competitive authoritarian regimes are less-consolidated electoral authoritarian regimes where, despite the unfair advantages enjoyed by incumbents, elections are meaningful enough for the opposition to win power electorally. In competitive authoritarian regimes, elections are an area of contestation where the incumbents’ power is tested by the opposition (Schedler 2013, 12). Electoral competition is “real but unfair” (Levitsky and Way 2010, 5). Competition is real in such regimes because opposition parties use democratic institutions to contest for power. Yet competition is unfair because the incumbent party uses strategic manipulation and harassment to hinder opposition parties’ chances to attain power through elections. The incumbent has power enough that it can make elections unfair, but not enough that formal democratic rules are completely turned into a façade (Levitsky and Way 2002, 53). Competitive authoritarianism is depicted by some scholars as unstable. Moore argues that an unstable authoritarian regime is one in which “there has been regime turnover but no democratic consolidation” (Moore 2017, 185). Levitsky and Way suggest that linkages with Western

¹⁰ Although somewhat arbitrary, this vote threshold is set as 70% by some scholars (Howard and Roessler 2006, 368; Levitsky and Way 2002, 55).

democratic countries might be important for a competitive authoritarian regime's stability (Levitsky and Way 2006). Others point to the high amount of contestation between the incumbent and the opposition to explain competitive authoritarianism's instability (Carothers 2018). Still others argue for the importance of coalition building (Velasco Guachalla et al. 2021). However, scholars like Velasco Guachalla et. al mainly analyze societal coalitions in their research. As I seek to demonstrate in my thesis, pre-electoral and legislative coalitions should also be examined as potentially important factors in competitive authoritarian stability.

2.4 Determining Türkiye's Regime Type

Turkish academia is rife with debate on how to classify Türkiye's regime. A significant number of scholars depict Türkiye as a competitive authoritarian regime, while others view the regime as neopatrimonial (Cengiz 2020; Uğur-Çınar 2017), and still others as a "plebiscitary presidential regime" (Z. Yılmaz 2022). Like Esen et al., I do not think that competitive authoritarianism and neopatrimonialism are mutually exclusive concepts (Esen, Gümüşçü, and Yavuzylmaz 2023, 39). However, emphasizing neopatrimonialism too much or describing Türkiye as a plebiscitary presidential regime risks overemphasizing Erdoğan's and the AKP's role in Turkish politics. While it is true that Erdoğan and his party are immensely important for Türkiye's autocratization, they are by no means the only significant actors. The People's Alliance is not a mere shopfront of AKP and its satellite parties, and one can reasonably assume that AKP's interactions with the MHP influences Türkiye's regime. Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis, it is best to focus on Türkiye's competitive authoritarian characteristics rather than its neopatrimonial or plebiscitary aspects.

There are plenty of indications that Türkiye's authoritarian regime is unconsolidated. That is, the AKP does not have the power to turn elections completely into tools of regime reinforcement, and the opposition can still win power through elections. Massive electoral fraud and disenfranchisement are not common occurrences in Turkish elections (Esen and

Gümüşçü 2016, 1595). Additionally, the incumbent party and coalition in Türkiye do not win with the large margins that one sees in hegemonic authoritarian regimes. In the 2023 presidential elections, Erdoğan won in a second round of elections by 52,18%. That is just 1.18 percentage points more than is required to become the president of Türkiye. As I have mentioned before, most scholars deem 70% as the minimum percentage required for an incumbent to win for the regime to be classified as hegemonic authoritarian. Erdoğan and his coalition win by margins that are small enough to indicate a competitive and unconsolidated authoritarian regime.

Türkiye's regime is competitive and unconsolidated, but authoritarian nevertheless. Since at least Türkiye's transition to a presidential republic in 2018, the AKP and the People's Alliance have won elections through what Bermeo labels "strategic election manipulation" (Bermeo 2016, 13). Strategic election manipulation aims to make elections more unfair to the opposition through acts that are done significantly before elections days. Thus, such manipulation is different from electoral fraud, which tends to happen on the day of election and is much easier for outside observers to detect. Türkiye experts have continuously written on the different strategies of election manipulation that Türkiye's incumbents have pursued. Özbudun has examined how the AKP has taken control of the country's judiciary to criminalize opposition activities (Özbudun 2015, 53). Irak has written on how the AKP has created partisan media 'bubble' to silence the opposition and hinder its communication capabilities (Irak 2016). Such research suggests that the AKP is very similar to other incumbent parties in electoral authoritarian regimes in terms of strategically manipulating elections. When combined with the unconsolidated aspect of Erdoğan's rule, AKP's electoral manipulation presents a good case for classifying Türkiye as a competitive authoritarian regime.

CHAPTER 3 - THE PEOPLE'S ALLIANCE AND ITS MEMBERS

On 20 February 2018, approximately nine months after the constitutional referendum which transformed Türkiye from a parliamentary republic to a presidential one, the AKP and the MHP announced the name of their new electoral alliance: The People's Alliance (*BloombergHT* 2018). One day later, laws were passed in the parliament that made it easier for parties to form and for the electorate to vote for electoral alliances (Köker 2018). Soon after, on 16 March 2018, the official newspaper of the republic announced the legalization of pre-electoral alliances ("Seçimlerin Temel Hükümleri ve Seçmen Kütükleri Hakkında Kanun ile Bazı Kanunlarda Değişiklik Yapılmasına Dair Kanun" 2018). Prior to the amendments made that month, political parties in Türkiye were barred from supporting other parties in the elections (Çelikbaş 2018).

Since then, the People's Alliance has been a crucial supporter of Erdoğan's rule over Türkiye. Many other parties have joined or supported the Alliance, such as the Free Cause Party (*Hür Dava Partisi* (HÜDA PAR)) and the Democratic Left Party (*Demokratik Sol Parti* (DSP)). Most recently, the People's Alliance has won the 2023 presidential elections, gaining the mandate to rule Türkiye until 2028, but has lost the 2024 local elections. Despite the prominence of the People's Alliance in Turkish politics, there have been few academic articles or books analyzing this organization. With this thesis, I aim to fill this gap in the literature by providing a detailed view of the People's Alliance, its origin, and how its member parties work within this particular institutional framework. Additionally, I aim to utilize existing literature on pre-electoral alliances, coalitions, authoritarian power sharing, and political parties to demonstrate possible points of conflict within the alliance.

The People's Alliance is a relatively unique power sharing institution that Erdoğan has utilized since 2018 to prolong his rule over Türkiye. As more scholars have recently begun to notice, pre-electoral alliances are a crucial aspect of politics in Türkiye and thus the

autocratization of the country (Ayan Musil 2024). Most scholars have Türkiye however have neglected to analyze the ruling People's Alliance and have instead focused on its rival, the Nation Alliance (*Millet İttifakı*) (Selçuk and Hekimci 2020; Başkan, Gümrükçü, and Canyaş 2022). This opposition-centric view does not change when one looks at the wider literature. Most of the academic articles and books written on coalitions have overwhelmingly been about the opposition (Gandhi and Ong 2019; Somer, McCoy, and Luke 2021). Those articles and books that are actually written on ruling coalitions have mostly been about democracies (Blais et al. 2006; Ganghof 2016; Lundell 2011; Kedar 2012). As a coalition government within an autocratic country, the People's Alliance exemplifies a crucial omission from the political science literature.

3.1 The MHP: Satellite or Partner?

An analysis of the People's Alliance would be meaningless if the MHP was a satellite of the AKP. Satellite parties, loosely defined by Sartori in *Parties and Party Systems* (1976), are “subordinate” to a ruling party (Sartori 1976, 112). Because of their inferior status vis-à-vis the ruling party, satellites do not meaningfully participate in the decision-making process of a country even if they are given parliamentary or administrative positions (Sartori 1976, 205). The function of such parties is to politically support the ruling party and transmit its messages to the public (Lewis 2006, 476). If the MHP is a satellite of the AKP, one can either attribute only very specific and few policies, or no policy at all to the MHP. Therefore, in such a scenario, one cannot meaningfully discuss if coalition governments are difference makers in a competitive authoritarian regime.

High profile and long-lasting disagreements between the MHP and the AKP are frequent enough to suggest that the People's Alliance is not a satellite-hegemon relationship. One such disagreement has been on the 50+1 threshold in presidential elections. At least since 2021, high-ranking AKP and MHP officials have publicly disagreed on whether or not to

eliminate this threshold (Yetkin 2023). Many AKP members, including Erdoğan, have expressed a desire to get rid of the threshold. However, these members have seemingly met with resistance from the MHP, with party leader Devlet Bahçeli calling the 50+1 threshold “the backbone of the executive-presidential system” (*Hürriyet Daily News* 2023). Such a disagreement would likely not be seen in between a satellite party and its hegemon. The MHP is, thus, likely not a satellite of the AKP. Instead, MHP is a non-satellite “junior partner” of a coalition (Kaarbo 1996), with its own interests and an ability to act on these interests to influence coalition government policy.

CHAPTER 4 - COOPERATIVE RELATIONSHIPS BEFORE AND AFTER

THE PEOPLE'S ALLIANCE

For the purposes of this study, the June and November 2015 general elections are significant for three distinct but interrelated reasons: AKP's ideological shift towards Turkish nationalism, the beginning of cooperation between the MHP and the AKP, and the reemergence of coalition-building in Turkish politics. After AKP's lackluster performance in the June 2015 elections, the party pivoted towards capturing Turkish nationalist votes. This led to an ideological confluence between the AKP and the MHP, which according to pre-existing theory likely made the eventual coalition more probable. Additionally, as the AKP was unable to form a single-party government in June, parties began coalition talks for the first time since 1999. These talks, as I argue, were foundational for the People's Alliance. In what I label as foundational cooperation, the MHP and the AKP built a repertoire of trust between each other between the 2015 elections and the formation of the People's Alliance. Ideological confluence and foundational cooperation laid the groundwork for the People's Alliance.

4.1 The End of Türkiye's Dominant Party System

Before delving into analysis, the reader should be familiarized with some of the winners and the losers of the two elections that took place in Türkiye in 2015. The 2015 election, identified as a critical juncture for Türkiye's regime by Ayan Musil (Ayan Musil 2024, 2), is when Türkiye's political system began changing from a dominant party system to one that began revolving around pre-electoral coalitions. This is because the June 2015 elections was when the AKP, for the first time in the party's history, lost its position of electoral and parliamentary dominance. Despite winning the most votes in the parliament, the AKP could thus be labeled as one of the biggest losers of the election. The party had attracted approximately 49.83% of the votes in the 2011 general election, marking its biggest electoral

success up until that point. However, in the June 2015 election, the AKP saw its votes decline by almost nine percentage points to 40.87%. As a result, this election was the first time in the party's history that the AKP was unable to attain enough votes to form a single party government. The dominance of the AKP had been brought to an end.

What, or who, had brought this era of dominant party politics to a close? If the AKP could be labeled as a loser of the June 2015 election, the MHP and the HDP stand out as clear winners. The MHP won 3.28% more votes in 2015 than it had in 2011, ending up with 16.29% of the total votes. Perhaps more impressively, the HDP won 13.12% of the votes after it decided to field its candidates as a party despite the risk posed by the 10% electoral threshold. As Aytaç and Çarkoğlu state, much of the gains of the MHP and the HDP came at the expense of the AKP (Aytaç and Çarkoğlu 2021, 757). Thus, in June 2015, the AKP was faced with a picture in which it was effectively getting its votes squeezed out by the Turkish and Kurdish nationalists.

Researchers have proposed multiple other explanations for the AKP's declining vote share in the June 2015 election. That the AKP lost votes due to the success of the MHP and the HDP is not the only explanation (Aytaç and Çarkoğlu 2021, 757; O. Şahin 2021, 21). Some have also proposed that the election results were a reflection of voter dissatisfaction with the country's economic performance (Çarkoğlu and Yıldırım 2015). Both of these explanations are of particular significance to this paper, since both help explain why the AKP decided to position itself closer to Turkish nationalism after June 2015.

What seems to be clear, and without much debate surrounding it, is that the June 2015 election meant that the AKP had lost its electoral and parliamentary dominance. I emphasize electoral and parliamentary, since the party still arguably had considerable sway in the judiciary (Özbudun 2015). What followed this loss of dominance was a change of strategy by the AKP elite that led to an ideological confluence between the two parties.

4.2 The Beginnings of an Ideological Confluence Between the AKP and the MHP

I define ideological confluence between the AKP and the MHP as the AKP portraying itself and its policies as more Turkish nationalist, in the vein of the MHP, to regain its dominant party status. And although I lack the necessary data to fully untangle the intentions of the AKP leaders, the rapid change in AKP's rhetoric and portrayed ideology after the June 2015 elections seems to suggest that a causal relationship could exist. In this section, I first briefly show the AKP's ideology before the June 2015, then contrast it with how the party portrayed itself between the June and November 2015 elections. The intention is to show that, during this critical period, the AKP realigned its ideological position to become closer to the MHP.

The AKP could be labeled as fairly nationalistic even before the June 2015 election. As early as the 2007 elections, as K. Şahin notes, the AKP had begun pursuing a more Turkish nationalist rhetoric in its campaign (K. Şahin 2014). This can perhaps best be seen in the opening lines of the AKP's 2007 election manifesto: "ONE NATION, ONE FLAG, ONE STATE IS THE ESSENCE OF OUR POLITICS" ("22 Temmuz 2007 Genel Seçimleri Seçim Beyannamesi" 2015). In fact, the AKP had already begun competing with the MHP when it comes to which political party is worthy to be considered the authentically nationalist one as early as 2007 (K. Şahin 2014). So, the June 2015 election cannot be seen as a turning point when it comes to the AKP's embrace of Turkish nationalism.

However, even though the AKP had embraced nationalist rhetoric long before June 2015, the date seems to have marked an important point in the party's relationship with the HDP and Türkiye's Kurdish minority. Indeed, it seems to be the AKP's demeanor towards the Kurdish people that has marked the biggest ideological shift of the party in 2015. Therefore,

one can state that although the AKP had already entered into a competition with the MHP before 2015, it had not adopted MHP's anti-Kurdish nationalist stance explicitly.

The sudden increase in terrorist attacks within Türkiye between June and November 2015 provides the link between voter dissatisfaction with the economy, the AKP's increasing adoption of Turkish nationalism, and the party's electoral victory in November. Between June and November 2015, Türkiye experienced a succession of terrorist attacks that would help reshape the country's political landscape. In July, 33 people were killed and approximately 100 were injured by an ISIS-affiliated suicide bomber (Kamer 2023). The following months saw an escalation of terrorist attacks by ISIS and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* (PKK)).

As a result of the terrorist attacks, the electorate began prioritizing security over economic performance (Aytaç and Çarkoğlu 2021). This change in priorities decreased the votes of both the MHP and the HDP in the November snap general election. Although the HDP's vote share can intuitively be attributed to a public backlash against the PKK's attacks and AKP's demonization of the party (O. Şahin 2021), MHP's declining vote share is more difficult to understand. Aytaç and Çarkoğlu state that, irrespective of how they might have felt about the party's handling of the Turkish economy, many voters thought in November 2015 that the AKP would be the most competent party in bringing back security to Türkiye (Aytaç and Çarkoğlu 2021). Due to this perception of competence, the AKP was able to siphon votes off the MHP. Thus, changing voter preferences seem to have strengthened the AKP in the November election and incentivized the party adopt Turkish nationalism.

The AKP's pivot towards Turkish nationalism in November can be clearly seen in its rhetoric.¹¹ Throughout the election campaign, the AKP repeatedly targeted the HDP, accusing

¹¹ It is very difficult to disentangle a causal relationship between AKP's campaign rhetoric and the voters' prioritization of security over economic performance. However, robustly establishing such a relationship is not necessary to state that both of these factors help demonstrate AKP's adoption of Turkish nationalism in 2015.

the party of not helping the government combat the PKK (Bardakçı 2016). In fact, in various speeches, Erdoğan denounced the HDP as collaborating with the PKK and aiding in its terrorist attacks (O. Şahin 2021, 24–25). Simultaneously, unity of the nation under the AKP’s “native and national MPS” and against terrorism were repeatedly emphasized in Erdoğan’s campaign speeches (O. Şahin 2021, 24). The November 2015 elections would see an AKP much more nationalist than its June counterpart win the elections.

The period between June and November 2015 saw the AKP and the MHP get ideologically closer to each other. Ideological closeness in turn helped the AKP attract both voters and members from the MHP. Most notably, Tuğrul Türkeş, son of MHP’s founder Alparslan Türkeş, left his father’s party and joined the AKP in September 2015 (*BBC News Türkçe* 2015). As the AKP put on the mantle of Turkish nationalism and Türkiye’s guardian against terrorism, MHP began losing its power. The formation of the People’s Alliance in 2018 should be analyzed with this knowledge in mind.

Ideological closeness has an important place in both the authoritarian power sharing and pre-electoral coalition literatures. First, there is the point made by Geddes, Wright, and Frantz that that ideological coherence is at risk in authoritarian power sharing arrangements (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018, 58). It logically follows that, all other things held constant, autocrats might be more willing to share power with parties that are ideologically similar to their own. And although Meng and Paine state that ideology is not sufficient to ensure a stable power sharing relationship, it is one of the necessary conditions (Meng and Paine 2022, 1209). The ideological confluence between the AKP and the MHP that one can observe in the years prior to the formation of the People’s Alliance seems to confirm that ideological similarity is an important aspect of authoritarian power sharing arrangements.

The pre-electoral alliance literature pays even more attention to ideological similarities. Here one needs pay particular attention to the differentiation between office-seeking and

policy-seeking political parties in order to better understand pre-electoral coalitions in presidential systems (Kellam 2017). Although all political parties likely seek to attain both political positions and policy goals, some parties are more policy-oriented than others (Kellam 2017, 395). Policy-oriented parties are more likely to form pre-electoral coalitions than their office-oriented counterparts, especially if the political party with which they form the coalition is ideologically close (Kellam 2017, 400). Thus, ideological confluence can increase the likelihood of a pre-electoral coalition and ideological closeness is an important aspect of coalition formation.

The MHP's actions in the 2015 elections help me make the argument that the MHP is a policy-seeking, rather than office-seeking party. When coalition talks began after the June 2015 election ended with no political party able to form a government on its own, the MHP rejected the AKP on primarily ideological grounds. At the beginning of the discussion process, MHP presented AKP with four of its demands: Do not change the first four provisions of the Constitution, announce that the peace process with the PKK is over, restart the anti-corruption investigations, and ensure that President Erdoğan act according to his position's legal boundaries (Onuş 2015). Since the AKP was unwilling to limit President Erdoğan's powers and denounce the peace process, the coalition fell through. The reason why the coalition did not happen was purely ideological.

The other alternative coalitions that could have been created in the period were a CHP-MHP-HDP coalition, an AKP-HDP coalition, or an AKP-CHP coalition. As the two nationalist parties, the MHP and the HDP, were the most important actors in the coalition talks due to their vote shares and strict boundaries. Once again, the MHP refused to enter a coalition on ideological grounds, this time with the HDP, as it equated the party with the PKK. This made a CHP-MHP-HDP coalition government impossible. The HDP, on the other hand, refused to form an AKP-HDP coalition. Despite HDP's willingness to form a coalition with the CHP,

with MHP's lack of cooperation, the two did not have enough seats to form a government. Thus, the only coalition governments that were actually possible to form were AKP-CHP and AKP-MHP governments.

The AKP-CHP coalition did not materialize despite a 32-days long discussion process. While the AKP sought to create a temporary coalition that would last only for three months, the CHP wanted a more permanent, four-year governing coalition with the AKP (*Hürriyet* 2015). The two parties had vastly different ideas of what a coalition government would entail, which stopped the discussions. One should note that the reasons why the AKP-CHP coalition did not materialize seem much less based on ideological reasoning than the AKP-MHP alliance. This helps support my argument that the MHP is a policy-oriented party that began contemplating an alliance between itself and the AKP only when the ideological confluence between the two parties reached a satisfactory level for the MHP's leaders.

Since most of the MHP's concerns against an AKP-MHP coalition seem to have been ideological, the AKP's adoption of Turkish nationalism might have made the MHP much more receptive to forming an alliance. The AKP's abandonment of the peace process and the transition to a presidential system which made Erdoğan's formalized Erdoğan's political power possibly the MHP much more willing to form a coalition with the ruling party.

4.3 Early Stages of Formative Cooperation Between the MHP and the AKP

The June-November 2015 period is significant not only because of ideology, but also because of coalition-building. Prior to June 2015 and since 1999, none of the parties in Türkiye had the opportunity or the necessity to create a governing coalition. The period between 2002, AKP's foundation, and 2015 was a period of dominant party politics under the AKP (Keyman 2014). Yet the June 2015 elections ended the dominance of AKP as a party and quickly led to

parties discussing forming coalition governments with one another. These discussions foreshadow the eventual alliance that would be formed between the AKP and the MHP.

The authoritarian power sharing literature, although severely lacking with analysis of pre-electoral coalitions, does mention that repeated interactions between actors might help make power sharing arrangements more stable. Boix and Svolik mention that regular interaction between authoritarian actors can help alleviate commitment and monitoring issues encountered in authoritarian power sharing (Boix and Svolik 2013, 301). Additionally, Meng and Paine state that interactions between actors before arrangements are formalized develop stable power sharing relationships (Meng and Paine 2022, 1208). Although there is no study that I am aware of that suggests such long term, pre-coalition formation relationships between political actors create stability in authoritarian multiparty governments, AKP and MHP's history does exhibit the existence of such a relationship. This, I argue, is enough to consider the possibility that formative cooperation is important for pre-electoral coalitions in competitive authoritarian regimes.

The importance of cooperation before coalition formation is something that has been reiterated many times across the pre-electoral coalition literature. Haugsgjerd Allern and Aylott suggest that when parties develop long-term stable relationships with one another before a pre-electoral coalition is formed, this relationship might increase the likelihood of a pre-electoral coalition (Haugsgjerd Allern and Aylott 2009, 279). This suggestion seems to echo the previously mentioned theses on trust-building formative cooperation amongst authoritarian actors.

The coalition talks between the AKP and the MHP are significant in that the discussions likely provided both of the parties with a clearer view of what the other party would demand in case a possible coalition was created. Additionally, as scholars have suggested, trust between

the AKP and the MHP might have been established. This might have made it easier for parties to position themselves in ways that made future coalitions more possible.

The two elections Türkiye had in 2015, one in June and the other in November, can be interpreted as the origin point of the People's Alliance. Shook by disappointing electoral results in June and governing a Türkiye increasingly experiencing terrorist attacks, the AKP incorporated Turkish nationalism into itself. This adoption made the party ideologically closer to the MHP while being perceived as more competent, attracted a significant amount of Turkish nationalist voters, and helped the party regain in November the single-party government it had lost in June. Additionally, the coalition talks that commenced after June might have made the parties more aware of each other's policy preferences and made future coalitions more likely.

After 2015, the most important year for those analyzing the People's Alliance and its origins is 2017. This is because 2017 was the year when Türkiye transitioned from a parliamentary to a presidential republic. Crucially, this transition was facilitated by an AKP-MHP alliance. In fact, one could say that the post-referendum electoral alliances were largely echoes of the fault lines which formed during the 2017 referendum campaign. In this subsection, I analyze the 2017 constitutional referendum, the presidential system, and how they paved the way for the People's Alliance.

Before an analysis of the 2017 referendum, a brief foray into the July 2016 coup d'état attempt is necessary to better understand actors' motivations and the political context in which the referendum took place. After all, the referendum took place only one year after the coup attempt. Although facts about the coup remain murky and are likely to remain so for the near future, most analysts agree that the coup attempt was orchestrated by the Gülen religious movement (*tarikat*). The first 'open confrontation' between the Gülenists and the AKP was the "prep school crisis" (Hacaloğlu 2013). The AKP was planning to shut down prep schools, a significant portion of which was controlled by the Gülen movement and was important for the

movement's financial health and recruitment (Taş 2018, 400). This crisis was followed by a corruption probe by Gülenists in the administration against AKP officials, and a subsequent anti-Gülenist purge of state institutions by the AKP (Taş 2018, 400). The 2016 coup attempt was the boiling point of this AKP-Gülen crisis.

After the coup failed, due in large part to AKP's ability to mobilize citizens against the soldiers participating in the coup (Esen and Gümüşçü 2017b), the opposition parties supported the President and his party and the government declared a state of emergency. Thereafter, the AKP commenced an immense purge against its rivals. This purge, although primarily targeting the Gülen movement, also helped the AKP persecute its other rivals such as liberals. It was after this coup attempt, these purges, and under a state of emergency, that the 2017 constitutional referendum took place.

Discussions to rewrite the constitution were new neither to post-2016 Türkiye nor Türkiye under the AKP. Since the 1980 military coup and the enactment of the 1982 Constitution under military law, there has been a wide consensus among the political elite of Türkiye that the constitution needs to be rewritten in a more democratic manner (Esen and Gümüşçü 2017a, 305). Thus, after the AKP won the 2011 elections by 49.83%, Erdoğan promised that he would rewrite the constitution to create a more democratic Türkiye. A constitutional commission was created with the involvement of the AKP, CHP, MHP, and the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi* (BDP)). Despite years of work and consensus around 60 articles, the constitutional commission dissolved in February 2016 due to AKP's insistence on and CHP's refusal of a presidential system (Esen and Gümüşçü 2017a, 305). This led the AKP to unilaterally draft its own constitution.

Despite drafting the constitution by itself, the AKP needed the cooperation of at least one other political party in the parliament in order to initiate a referendum. This cooperation would be provided by the MHP. Neither researchers nor the general public seem to have

reached a consensus on the origins of the MHP-AKP alliance. Some argue that the MHP leadership might have hoped to gain seats in the new presidential government, despite MHP leader Bahçeli's refusal in 2017 that he would want to become the vice-president (Ö. Yılmaz 2017). Another explanation could be that the AKP's ideological shift and coalition talks in 2015 made MHP more sympathetic to an AKP-led presidential republic. Regardless, the MHP provided the support AKP needed and a referendum campaigning process commenced.

MHP leadership provided a plethora of reasons for their support of the presidential system. The first was that the presidential system would legalize the Erdoğan's dubiously legal use of his presidential powers since his election to the presidency in 2014 (*birgun.net* 2017). Additionally, Bahçeli frequently referenced the unity that the country needed when it was surrounded by enemies, stating that "Türkiye is under siege. The groups that are disturbed by our thousand-year-old brotherhood are on bloody watch among us" (*birgun.net* 2017). As can be seen, the emphasis of the party leadership was on the need for unity around a strong leader who had a legal mandate to exercise such strong leadership. MHP's security-focused discourse on the 2017 referendum displays a continuation of the securitization of Turkish politics, a process that began in recent Turkish history in 2015.

Despite not able to establish a direct causal link between the 2015 and the 2017 elections, I should emphasize that there might be a link between Bahçeli's complaint on the President's unconstitutional use of his powers in 2015 and the MHP's support to legalize Erdoğan's presidentialism in 2017. Far from a sign of cynical political pragmatism or inconsistency, MHP's support for the AKP in 2017 could be interpreted as a way for the party to ensure that it could participate in setting the boundaries for the President. This explanation is far from robust, but nevertheless worthy of a mention.

The referendum process is important not only to see the origins of the MHP-AKP alliance but also to understand the immense differences between the pre- and post-2017 MHP.

The 2017 referendum, and MHP's declaration of support for Erdoğan and the AKP, initiated a period of disintegration for the nationalists. Factions within the MHP who had opposed Bahçeli's leadership seized the dissatisfaction caused by the party's support of the AKP after years of opposition to oust their leader. Thus, MHP leadership spent most of its energy during the 2017 referendum process on trying to keep the party together (Esen and Gümüşçü 2017a).

Anti-AKP sentiments or a desire for leadership were not the only reasons why some MHP members chose to dissent, voting and campaigning against their party. Part of the argument that the MHP dissidents used against the party leadership was that the presidential system would completely destroy the party. More specifically, MHP dissidents argued that the parliamentary system would be the only system to ensure that the MHP was a meaningful political actor, and that a presidential system would make small parties such as the MHP irrelevant (Esen and Gümüşçü 2017a, 311). According to the dissidents, a presidential Türkiye would be a Türkiye without the MHP.

The immediate aftermath of the 2017 referendum seemed to confirm the MHP dissidents' worst fears. The party's voter base seemed to mostly abandon the party, with only 30% of MHP supporters voting for the constitutional change (Bilgin and Erdoğan 2018, 35). This is despite the party beginning to convince more of its voters that a constitutional change would be more beneficial for the party and Türkiye towards the end of the campaign period (Bilgin and Erdoğan 2018, 36). The 2017 period can thus be analyzed not only as a period of transition for the country but also a period of transition for the party.

The period that starts with June 2015 and ends with the 2017 referendum is important to the People's Alliance in that it provides one with an important example of the formative cooperation that existed between the AKP and the MHP before any electoral coalition was formalized. Informally put, one could state that this period was a 'trial-run' of sorts of the People's Alliance. The AKP and the MHP understood each other's intentions and policy

goals. Thus, they could act on this information, just like the AKP did, and create a foundation upon which they created a pre-electoral coalition.

4.4 Cooperative Relationships After the Formation of the People's Alliance

Unsurprisingly, the cooperative relationship between the AKP and the MHP has not ended after the formation of the People's Alliance. The two parties have regularly discussed electoral strategies with one another, collaborated on campaign messaging, and possibly even colluded to change state rules. Yet, an analysis of the processes behind these cooperative actions reveals that cooperation between the AKP and the MHP also has its limits. As can be seen especially in the discussions surrounding electoral strategies, both of the parties have expressed reservations concerning party prestige when refraining from fully cooperating with one another.

The 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections provide one with a useful period in which to understand when the AKP and the MHP do not fully cooperate with one another. After losing two crucial cities, Istanbul and Ankara, to the opposition in the 2019 local elections, the People's Alliance faced a discomfiting situation in 2023. Due to the loss of these two major cities, the patronage networks of the alliance were weakened. As Tepe and Alemdaroğlu have stated, the AKP has frequently used municipal governments and changes in the public-procurement law to expand and protect its construction-fueled patronage networks (Tepe and Alemdaroğlu 2021, 92–93). Losing Istanbul and Ankara, two cities in Türkiye's most populous provinces as indicated by the Turkish Statistical Institute (*Türkiye İstatistik Enstitüsü* (TÜİK)) ("Adrese Dayalı Nüfus Kayıt Sistemi Sonuçları, 2023" 2023), could reasonably be interpreted as a blow to the patronage network of the People's Alliance. Additionally, many of the polls published before the 2023 elections predicted a tight race

between the two alliances and an even tighter race between President Erdoğan and the opposition's main candidate Kılıçdaroğlu ("14 Mayıs seçim anketleri: Partiler ve ittifakların oy oranı kaç?" 2023). Both the damage to the alliance's patronage network and the polls indicated that the People's Alliance would face a difficult election in 2023.

It would not have been unreasonable to expect that, when faced with a difficult and uncertain electoral landscape, member parties of the People's Alliance would seek to cooperate in ways that proved advantageous against the opposition. Political parties have often cooperated by withdrawing or fielding candidates in constituencies where it would benefit their partner party (Bértoa and Enyedi 2021, 9). Yet an examination of the discussions between the AKP and the MHP on joint electoral lists and the withdrawal of candidates reveals that the actions of the two parties were far from cooperative in the 2023 election season. Party prestige was a key concern for both the AKP and the MHP when it came to discussions of cooperation during the 2023 campaign.

Until the deadline given by Türkiye's Supreme Election Council (*Yüksek Seçim Kurulu* (YSK)) had passed, the AKP was adamant in creating a joint electoral list with the other parties of the People's Alliance. This desire of the AKP might have been partially motivated by a fear that the opposition alliance would create its own joint electoral list, which could have put the opposition in an advantageous position against the People's Alliance (Sayın 2023). AKP's adamancy in creating a joint electoral list is evident in Erdoğan's personal visits to the leaders of these parties to discuss this topic (Sayın 2023). Yet although the AKP was soundly in favor of creating a joint electoral list with the other parties of the People's Alliance, the party was more reluctant to withdraw any of its candidates in favor of its partners.

The AKP's reluctance to cooperate could be explained by the party's concern that its prestige was at stake if it withdrew any of its candidates. News reports from the time indicate

that many AKP leaders felt that their party should not withdraw any candidates because it was “the incumbent party,” and that the ‘burden of withdrawal’ fell on the MHP (El 2023). This report can be interpreted to indicate that the AKP felt a sense of superiority in comparison to its foremost partner. More importantly, the AKP’s desire for a joint electoral list but its refusal to give direct concessions to the MHP show that concerns of party prestige were at the forefront in discussions between the two parties in 2023.

The MHP had its own reservations concerning party prestige and cooperation before the 2023 elections. In a series of statements that he made on X/Twitter, party president Bahçeli clearly indicated that the MHP forming a joint list with the AKP would be a blow to the party’s political standing. Stating that his party had a “54 year-long gigantic past and experience,” and warning those who had “committed the error of patronizing” the MHP, Bahçeli announced that his party would not participate in a joint electoral list (Bahçeli 2023). Such statements from the party leader hint that the MHP limited its cooperation with the AKP because its leadership felt that cooperation would decrease the MHP’s prestige as an independent, nationalist, political party. Additional evidence support this claim. Statements made by the other leaders of the MHP also emphasize the party’s long history and how the MHP “cannot be treated like it is a small party” (El 2023). Further, MHP’s leadership cadre frequently underlined how it would be inappropriate for the second biggest party in the People’s Alliance to create a joint electoral list with the AKP while smaller partner parties like the New Welfare Party (*Yeniden Refah Partisi* (YRP)) fielded their own candidates (“Seçim 2023: ‘Ortak liste’ için gözler liderlerde, kulislerde neler konuşuluyor?” 2023). MHP, just like the AKP, often mentioned issues related to party prestige when it came to the cooperative relationships within the People’s Alliance before the 2023 elections.

Although creating a joint electoral list could have been beneficial to both the AKP and the MHP when facing an uncertain electoral atmosphere and a fairly unified opposition,

neither the AKP nor the MHP were willing to create one before the 2023 elections. Although the present thesis does not and cannot offer a causal explanation of the reluctance of the AKP and the MHP to cooperate, it is interesting how much issues of party prestige were mentioned by the two parties during negotiations.

CHAPTER 5 - CONCLUSION

The People's Alliance is important in that it provides one with an example of a stable pre-electoral coalition in a competitive authoritarian regime. There is, unfortunately, very little written on such power sharing arrangements. Most of what is written on authoritarian power sharing can be applicable to pre-electoral alliances, yet there is very few written that attempts to marry these two interrelated literatures. With this thesis, one of my aims has been to accomplish this synthesis of the two literatures in order to find important commonalities that might shed light on how pre-electoral alliances are formed and function in competitive authoritarian regimes.

This thesis suggests through an account of the People's Alliance that ideology is a key factor to be considered when it comes to pre-electoral alliances in competitive authoritarian regimes. There have been many scholars who have suggested that ideology is important in authoritarian power sharing and pre-electoral coalition formation, but most have conducted large or medium-N analyses that have not provided readers with examples of how ideological confluence might take place. This thesis shows, with exact dates, when and how the AKP and the MHP began to ideologically get close to one another. I argue that, due to losing its status as a dominant political party, the AKP chose to abandon its pro-Kurdish stance and embrace MHP's more hawkish position on Kurdish nationalists. Additionally, I show that much of the misgivings the MHP had towards forming a coalition with the AKP were ideological, and that once an ideological confluence occurred between the two parties, the MHP was more willing to engage in coalition talks. Overall, this thesis supports those works that emphasize the importance of ideology when it comes to authoritarian power sharing and pre-electoral coalition formation.

Ideology has not been the only aspect of pre-electoral coalitions in authoritarian regimes that I have looked at in this thesis. I have additionally aimed to label and demonstrate

the existence of a particular type of cooperation significant for pre-electoral coalition formation in authoritarian contexts: Formative cooperation. Such cooperation, as I have described, is cooperation between two political parties before they form a pre-electoral coalition. Previous work has occasionally mentioned that building long-term relationships of trust and cooperating before power sharing arrangements are made is important for stability. However, very few have deemed it important to focus on this phenomenon or give it a name. Although my account of this formative cooperation has been overwhelmingly descriptive, I hope that future research can identify other instances of formative cooperation and conduct robust causal analysis on the subject. The presence of such cooperation, over multiple years, in the example of the People's Alliance suggests that the subject is worthy of further research.

Although to a lesser extent, I have also touched on cooperation between the AKP and the MHP after the formation of the People's Alliance. In this section, I have primarily sought to demonstrate that although rational incentives might make one expect collaboration in certain scenarios, concerns with prestige might be blocking cooperation. A joint electoral list between the AKP and the MHP was desired, yet could ultimately not be created because of a mutual concern between the two parties with party prestige.

This thesis has not attempted to provide the readers with a causal analysis. Rather, my intention has been to provide the readers with a descriptive account of the People's Alliance that both tests some previous research and suggests fairly new pathways for other researchers to build causal arguments on. Some exciting avenues of research could include looking if formative cooperation has a causal effect on authoritarian coalition formation. Other research could look at when parties in authoritarian pre-electoral alliances choose to not cooperate. It is my hope that either I, or another researcher, will continue to analyze pre-electoral alliances in authoritarian regimes and help us all gain a better understanding of how autocrats share power to stay in power.

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