

Invented Myths in Contemporary Turkish Political Advertising

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The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house – Audre Lorde

Abstract

This article focuses on the November 2015 elections in Turkey and analyze the discourses embedded in the political campaign videos produced and circulated by the Justice and Development Party (ruling party since 2002), Republican People's Party (first political party of the republic), People's Democratic Party (main vehicle of the Kurdish politics), and Nationalist Movement Party (ethno-nationalist party). Republic of Turkey's construction in the national imagination over the past 90 years have both rested on and reproduced a range of themes which are themselves based on recently invented nationalist myths such as the common enemy, the multicultural mosaic, order and progress, fight against imperialism, the break from the Ottoman empire, and Turkey as bridge between east-and-west. Hence, we argue that regardless of their severely diverse stance on key issues in the political realm, all the political parties use the hegemony's myths as tools in their advertisements, therefore reifying these themes in the public imagination.

Keywords:

Political ads, national myths, critical discourse analysis, Turkey

Within the last two years, Turkish people went to the ballot boxes four times for different elections. Each of these elections, whether presidential, municipal, or parliamentary, and the preceding political campaign periods dragged a loaded constellation of media discourses indicative of the nature of Turkish political culture as polarized, masculine, and exclusionary. Among these media discourses, political campaign videos by the primary running parties are worthy of analysis. These videos reveal both the inherent limits of and the potential openings in Turkish political discourse. We focus on the November 2015 elections in Turkey and analyze the discourses embedded in campaign videos produced and circulated by the Justice and Development Party (ruling party since

2002), Republican People's Party (first political party of the republic, founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's), People's Democratic Party (main vehicle of the Kurdish politics), and Nationalist Movement Party (ethnonationalist party). In particular, we illustrate how despite advocating different principles and subscribing to different philosophies, all of the parties use the mythic-making themes that have traditionally been used in political discourse in the Republic of Turkey's history.

Research by some scholars argues that political marketing communication in Turkey is fragmented, in terms of the persuasive themes used, and that this fragmentary nature makes it difficult to analyze political rhetoric as a whole. To the contrary, we argue that a thorough analysis of political rhetoric in contemporary Turkish politics, while superficially fragmented and difficult to analyze, has common themes. The reason for such analytical difficulty lies in the fact that discourse is often fragmentary. As van Dijk notes, "discourses are not just isolated linguistic "objects," but are integral parts of communicative acts in some sociocultural situation." Van Dijk calls this sociocultural situation context and considers context inseparable from speech acts under discursive analysis. Thus a discourse analysis primarily aims at the explication of qualitative data rather than quantitative data and requires extended, long-term research in a particular sociocultural setting.

In this article we focus on political advertisements because they provide fruitful discursive sites through which we can locate historical and contemporary political rhetoric. The components of political rhetoric in ads are enmeshed also with the popular as advertisements are popular culture tools. We conduct a critical discourse analysis of the advertisements used by the four largest parties in Turkey's most recent election. The data for this study comes from the television advertisements (which were also circulated on social media). We provide detailed descriptions and analysis of the components in the advertisements. We suggest that the political ads under discussion offer tangible vantage points not only on political culture but also on dominant communicative tools and mechanisms in contemporary Turkish society.

The Master's Tools. Turkish political advertisements have had different central themes ranging from the *common enemy* to *progress* and from *regional hero* to *multicultural mosaic*. These positionings are borrowed from the "official" state discourse. The idea of economic, scientific, and cultural progress had been at the heart of Turkey's modernization project and has been widely circulated in various modified forms. Advertising has been used in political campaigning in Turkey since 1950s with the start of the multi-party system, the employment of brand strategists and advertising agencies is relatively more recent. Turkey's first notable comprehensive political campaigning took place in the first multi-party elections in 1950. The main opposition Democratic Party opted for rallies and communication via the press. In only what was the second multi-party election after the proclamation

of the Republic, the Democratic Party won the elections with their “*Enough! People Have the Say*” campaign, mostly capitalizing on the difficulties suffered by the population during the second world war. After the more democratic 1961 constitution was passed, political parties found a new ground to communicate their positions and ideologies, and were competitors very much like brands for consumer goods for the first time in Turkey. In 1977, the Justice Party hired the Cenajans advertising agency which marked the first collaboration between an advertising agency and a political party. In 1983, the Manajans advertising agency created the Motherland Party’s campaign. Its Chief Executive Officer, Eli Acıman, commented on the relationship between advertising and political parties:

“...political parties are a little different than margarine producers. The difference is in that, producers sell a product or service, political parties sell a belief. The party thinks about how to sell this belief, and because it is not an expert in this, it is helpless and thus, at that point, needs an advertising agency”

Hence, the meshing of marketing logic to the political realm, and the application of the neo-liberal advertise-or-perish principle was already being weaved into everyday discourse. With the neo-liberal turn in the 1990s, the political campaigns took on a hybrid practice in that they reflected the hybridity found in local advertisements, although the principles with which they were prepared were supposedly “globalized” as most of them were produced by local branches of global network agencies.

Justice and Development Party (AKP) Between November 2002 and November 2015, the AKP topped all of the local, national, and presidential elections as the party with the highest national votes in Turkey. The reasons behind the electoral success accumulated by AKP are the topic of another discussion, which would revolve around political history, social psychology, and law in Turkey. The Party’s communication strategy, on the other hand, is considered to be an important ingredient in its electoral success. Prosperity, novelty, and development have been keywords in AKP’s communication campaigns since 2002. “The new Turkey” as the party tagline has been congruent with the neoliberal capitalist policies that are in effect in diverse areas from the workforce to urban transformation. Despite “novelty” as a discursive tool in their political marketing and “the new Turkey” as the Party tagline, the AKP offers only an extension of the official state narrative, especially in relation to multiculturalism, diversity, and democracy in Turkey. Moreover, “novelty” as a keyword with positive discursive connotation helped the AKP cover the adverse outcomes of its policies in diverse areas from labor politics to women’s rights.

The advertising video under discussion here came out in late October one week before the November 1, 2015 elections. The video, with its highly emotional tone, parallels the usual strategy of election campaigns executed by the AKP's communication team. Yiğitbaşı, a political analyst, explains the Party's usual campaign structure as composed of three temporal and corresponding semantic steps: In the first step the campaign rhetoric focuses on messages revolving around already accomplished activities and election promises by the Party. In the second step, a rhetorical emphasis is placed on the idea of the future. Finally, in the third step, which is often only a couple weeks preceding the actual elections, the campaign rhetoric focuses exclusively on voters' emotions. The ads in this latest stage of AKP's communication campaigns revolve around national unity, empathy, and fraternity. With its highly emotional tone and powerful symbols, the ad under discussion here illustrates the AKP's communication work at this final stage.

The ad, in the form of a music video for the song "This Country is ours," circulated widely and was frequently on TV channels during the week preceding the November 2015 elections. The title of the song and the ad's slogan "This country is ours" is also the title of a poem by the Turkish communist poet known worldwide, Nazım Hikmet. This is unlikely to be coincidental, as the AKP communication team often works towards re-signifying already existing culturally and historically significant messages.

The election ad's slogan "this country is ours" (bu memleket bizim) is embodied by the song's sentimental melody and lyrics, which read like:

*"Its water is silver, its rock is gold,
Look, it looks like heaven,
History and legend everywhere,
How come one is not proud?
This is the clime of roses,
The land of higher souls,
Neither fighting suits us nor affray fits,
What is fixed for us is love and peace
These loves are ours,
These legends are ours,
These people are ours, all of ours.
This country is ours, this country is ours."*

The visual composition of the ad complements the semantic world constructed in the lyrics. The video opens with the sounds of birds chirping. A five year old boy and his grandfather come into a historical, yet renovated, modern-looking building. The old man shows the boy around the spacious room. On the walls are the photographs of Istanbul and the places in Anatolia and the portraits of people that represent different groups in Turkey. Suddenly, a cacophonous sound rises. A group of musicians start playing their instruments. Soon the mellow song starts with two female vocalists alternately singing. Then, order and harmony are restored, as an audience accumulates around the orchestra, which consists of men and women with diverse looks. The individual musicians including an Alevi-looking bağlama player, a Kemancha player possibly from the Black Sea region, and a head-scarfed guitarist signify a cultural mosaic, a harmonious existence in diversity. As the song is performed, the audience grows around the musicians; some start singing along with the vocalists. At the end of the song, all applaud with joy and energy.

The ideal of togetherness and unity in this ad parallels the state's narrative that has constructed Turkey as a cultural mosaic. Multiculturalism as an official ideology is deeply problematic in Turkey as it obfuscates the state's policies of assimilation. In the national ideology, Turkey is the homeland to diverse peoples. Yet despite various ethnic compositions, people of Turkey are ideally ethnic Turks. If not, they are expected to become Turks by default of their citizenry. The ones who reject Turkishness and insist on their ethnic identity, on the other hand, are outcast and punished through various ways, from forced migration to national education policies.

On the other hand, all ethnic identities, which are manifested in cultural domains, are considered to rest in equal distance to "Turkishness," which is considered the essential category of citizenship. This model of multiculturalism, as Peter McLaren illustrates, has "a tendency to essentialize cultural difference... and ignore the historical and cultural situatedness of difference." This model considers difference as "an essence that exists independently of history, culture, and power" among groups. The Turkish state's multiculturalism model then not only homogenizes different ethnic groups and restrains difference in cultural domains, but also fixes and essentializes a cultural identity within itself by assuming culture as harmonious and stable, free from history and change.

Just like in the state's historical construction, the appreciation of cultural diversity through the Anatolian mosaic is the final destination in AKP's election ad. Perceived to be an ahistorical and homogeneous whole, this cultural mosaic portrayed in "This Country is ours" strips away all the differences between cultural groups. These differences are represented through musical instruments, outfits, and other signifiers. People are positioned in equal distance to each other. The state, as the center of power and the mechanism of inequality, is rendered invisible in this picture.

Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). Launched in October 2013, HDP is the left-leaning, pro-Kurdish party that holds fifty-nine seats in the current Turkish parliament. Although a continuation of the Kurdish political movement, HDP is a novel formation, which brings together dozens of constituents including LGBT organizations and socialist parties. Even though HDP's campaigns in 2015 elections relied mostly on social media, the Party also utilized TV ads, especially for the November re-election.

The HDP ad with the slogan of "out of spite" circulated on TV channels throughout October. This slogan stands for the resilience of HDP and its vote base after a violent summer following the June election. However, it also places the Party within the discursive terrain drawn by AKP and the official state ideology. In the ad, we see shots of culturally diverse people in diverse settings such as at a dinner table, a sanctuary, a street corner, or a work place. A male voiceover recites the following:

Out of spite, hope

Out of spite, peace

Men and women equal and next to each other, out of spite

...

Horon (traditional folk dance of Black sea region), halay (Kurdish folkdance), saz (traditional Alevi instrument),

out of spite

...

Both multi-colored and multi-lingual, out of spite

Out of spite, zilgıt (traditional Kurdish vocal performance)

Out of spite, laughter

....

Even though the voiceover offers a semantic world consistent with the HDP's self-positioning, it also demarcates the Party's horizon within the terrain of both the AKP and the official state ideology. In the ad's construction, for instance, "multiculturalism" as an ideal is defined with the shortcut symbols of folkdances and musical instruments consistent with the state's narrative. Another instance is the note on "laughter" over the shots of laughing women. This is a direct response to an AKP official who declared that women ought to be restricting their laughter in public.

Republican People's Party (CHP). As the traditional inheritor of the Republic of Turkey's recently invented and otherwise myths, the Republican People's party offers solutions to contemporary problems such as credit card debt

and the often-modified education system with updated versions of myths from 1923, the founding year of the republic. While these myths do not correspond one-to-one with the myths most often used in advertising (binary opposites such as David vs. Goliath), they correspond with important Turkish myths and traditions.

The language is both informative and emotional, largely echoing the plethora of non-political advertisements in Turkey. The plots are simple, asking people simple questions in a street-interview fashion: Busy streets with “real” people with real problems are featured, tapping into issues such as credit card debt, the education system, and funding for small and medium enterprises that most viewers can relate to. All three advertisements end with “*we are there, we can do it, RPP*” and all three offer a concrete plan designed by field-specific experts on what is promised. One advertisement promises to forego 80% of everyone’s credit card debt, and emphasizes that the Republican People’s Party has already talked to banks about this issue. Another promises that the reforms proposed for education have not been designed by someone’s friend (indicating that the Justice and Development Party engages in nepotism) but by an expert on the topic. This is a throwback to the founding years of the republic when experts were brought in from Switzerland to design the education system and the curriculums in 1920s. Despite featuring a woman in headscarf – a symbol with critical cultural significance within Turkey’s tumultuous relationship with and practice of secularism (and its absence), the ruling party’s alleged constituent base, the advertisement rides on the myths and ideals created during the formative years of the republic.

The third advertisement takes place in front of a typical small shop found in many neighborhoods and focuses on small medium enterprises and promises that every SME (*what’s that?*) will get as much interest free credit as the amount of tax they pay. That the Party has worked with experts to come with this proposal is emphasized. The general atmosphere is identical to the two advertisements mentioned above.

The Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). One of its advertisements takes place in an auto-repair shop. The auto-repair shop is imbued with honest working-class connotations, as *usta* (master) and *çırak* (apprentice) resonate deeply within Turkish society. Ills that have befallen the country are being talked about but are not specified. Heavily riding on the principle of hedging whereby a directness or commitment to something specific is avoided, despite appearing precise, the advertisement neither names the alleged culprit nor makes a central claim. Hedging is used to create strategic ambiguity in claims. It constructs the “*common enemy*” theme and associated rhetoric found in Turkish political advertisements, textbooks, and everyday talk.

Another advertisement features a family where the female wears the headscarf --this nods to the ruling party’s conceptualization of a model Turkish society. It must also be noted that the wife is asking the husband “*who are we voting for this time?*” further grounding the family in traditional gender roles in which the men are taken to be

more knowledgeable than the women. Focusing on the recurring elections, this advertisement echoes themes from the previous one. The words “*the President*,” “*says elections again*” are heard through the news. The male figure says “*we will not vote for those who destroyed the economy, those who left us unemployed, and those who are responsible for importing even the hay we use.*” “*You know*” is again used as a line indicating in the face of these negative events, the viewer knows which party to vote for. There is a pause between *you* and *know* in “*You, know*,” thus creating a feeling of empowerment in the viewer. All three advertisements have a national socialist ring to it where employment in conjunction with national security and welfare is sanctified.

Overall, the global logic of advertising is applied in hybridized form to Turkish elements such as nation-building myths and contemporary aesthetic preferences. The advertisements convey the hue, chroma, and nature of popular contemporary cultural productions in Turkey. Offering the consumers of these advertisements the same visuals as contemporary movies and other advertisements made in Turkey, the advertisements reify both this particular aesthetic and the citizen’s role as consumers. Overall, we contend that regardless of their political alignment, all the parties use the state-produced rhetoric and tropes of the past 90 years. In doing so, they reconstitute citizens as consumers, and imbue this identity with brotherhood, peace, state as the holly grail, progress, seeing the big picture, and contribute to the creation of a mass society through the marketing and consumption of politics.

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