

Authoritarian Populism and the Discourse of “the People” in the Turkish Islamist Media: The Case of *Yeni Şafak*

YEŞİM KAPTAN¹
Kent State University, USA

The expression “the people” became an epicenter of media debates during Turkey’s June 2018 national elections and its transition from parliamentary to presidential governance. Through qualitative and semiotic analysis of primary sources (newspaper stories, op-eds, columns, and editorials), this study investigates political rhetoric and the concept of “the people” in Turkish Islamist print media, particularly the progovernment Turkish daily *Yeni Şafak*. This article brings to light how a contested meaning of the concept “the people” was featured in the daily in the midst of rival, polarizing populist discourses during the 2018 national elections in Turkey. The analysis reveals that *Yeni Şafak* articulated views representing populism and the ethos of political Islam in the media ideology—an ambiguous and equivocal systemic worldview of media institutions grounded in a greater system of beliefs and processes naturalized as social reality. As a result, *Yeni Şafak* created unyielding divides in the society and served the production, dissemination, and mobilization of the populist discourse of the ruling party constellated around the politics of the definition of “the people.”

Keywords: populism, the people, Islamic media, media discourse, Yeni Şafak, Turkey, political rhetoric

In 2018, Turkey ^{held} national elections under extreme polarization between two major electoral alliances: (1) the People’s Allies (Cumhur İttifakı), composed of the ruling Islamist-conservative Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) and the ultranationalist Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP); and (2) the National Allies (Millet İttifakı), made up of the oppositional parties including Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP, center left), İYİ Parti (center right), and two other small right-wing parties. The election, which marked a turning point in Turkey’s political system, transformed the parliamentary system into a presidential system, giving increased executive power to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The regime change put the concept of “the people,” along with discussions of populism, at the epicenter of election-related debates. More recently, Turkey has seen a rise in populist politics, backed by the rhetoric of the progovernment Turkish press.

Yeşim Kaptan: ykaptan@kent.edu

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As Mazzoleni (2008) notes, media-savvy populist leaders use national media to communicate their messages and gain influence. For the political actors and the publics, the media stand at the intersection of geopolitics and national-populist communication. According to Hall (2000), "The media's main sphere of operations is the production and transformation of ideologies" (p. 271). In this article, I define *media ideology* as a systemic, albeit ambiguous and equivocal, worldview of media institutions grounded in a greater system of beliefs, processes, values, and mindsets that are naturalized as social reality and the truth in particular groups, publics, and societies. Analyzing media texts reveals ideologies of media institutions and also discloses the dominant discourses and power relations present in society. For instance, with the rise of the Islamic press in the 1980s, the Islamist worldview has become one of the most visibly dominant ideologies in Turkey. After the AKP came into power in 2002, Islam gained preeminence as the ideology of the state, the society, and the mainstream media. Mazzoleni argues that traditional mainstream media remain significant in shaping and disseminating political discourses.

Several studies underline that media may facilitate the diffusion of populist ideas in society (Mazzoleni, 2008; Müller et al., 2017). However, Adar and Türkmen (2019) state that "we still know little about how social cleavages shape the way 'the people' is conceptualized by populist actors as well as how populist discourse shapes existing social cleavages" (p. 1). Populism is "a discourse that brings into being what it claims to represent: *the people* [emphasis added]" (Thomassen, 2019, p. 329). Laclau (2005a) conceives of "the people" as "a minimal unit of analysis" (p. 72) in populist politics. Given that "how 'the people' is defined and to whom it refers is vital to any analysis of populism" (Adar & Türkmen, 2019, p. 2), this study allows us to address discursive construction of these cleavages (e.g., the people and its historical and political others) and provides insights into understanding the articulation of the political populism with the media ideology in a non-Western society as well as the role of progovernment Islamist media in the dissemination of populist discourse.

Despite an increasing number of research investigations involving populism in Turkey (Aytaç & Elçi, 2019; Aytaç & Öniş, 2014; Baykan, 2017; Bozkurt, 2013; Özdamar & Ceydilek, 2019; Selçuk, 2016; Somer & McCoy, 2018; Yabancı, 2016), the relationship between populist politics and media discourse has been both theoretically and empirically understudied. A few studies (Bulut & Yörük, 2017; Dinçşahin, 2012; Tambar, 2009) have suggested the media to explore the discursive and performative aspects of populist rhetoric employed by President Erdoğan and the AKP. Some scholars have investigated the discursive strategies of the Islamic press by focusing on gender politics, particularly the female headscarf issue (Dursun, 2006; Gül & Gül, 2000; Özcan, 2015). However, current literature overlooks the examination of populist discourse in the Islamic Turkish press concerning rhetorical devices and linguistic productions of this ideological formation. By employing semiotic analysis, this article aims to navigate the ideological terrain of local, discursive struggles in the context of the Turkish press, providing insight for critical media studies scholars and semioticians. In this research, I focus on the newspaper *Yeni Şafak*, which is known for its hardline support for President Erdoğan, and, thus, is indisputably considered progovernment. A review of *Yeni Şafak's* coverage of the 2018 elections may help to map out the populist discourse and crystalize signifying strategies of the Islamic newspaper that resonate with the unique, ideological brand of populism espoused by Erdoğan and the AKP regime.

Based on empirical data, I argue that the contested meanings of “the people,” consistently conveyed by *Yeni Şafak* in rival and polarized discourses of the Summer 2018 elections, reveal the articulation of media ideology reflecting political Islam and the populist political discourse in Turkey. The progovernment daily imposes a semantic referential between “the people” and Erdoğan and creates new semantic links reinforcing the president and the AKP as the self-styled representatives of “the people.” Thereby, *Yeni Şafak* serves the production, dissemination, and the mobilization of the populist discourse of the ruling party constellated around the politics of the definition of “the people.” Because “the people” and “the other” are mutually constructive and inextricably intertwined social categories, I explore the existing discursive formations of “the other” in the current context with regard to use of the expression “the people” in election rhetoric.

The next section reviews scholarship regarding populism and conceptualization of the expression “the people.” Then, I focus on the history of populist politics in Turkey and the methodology of the study. Later, I explore the content of *Yeni Şafak* around the 2018 elections to identify and analyze the significance of the conceptualization of “the people” in current Turkish politics. In conclusion, I deliberate how the media ideology of the Islamic daily *Yeni Şafak* is expressed in variations of the manifestations of “the people” to invoke a populist platform while articulating the political rhetoric of the party in power.

The Crux of Populism: “The People” Versus “the Others”

Laclau (2005a) argues that populism is not “a *type* of organization or an ideology to be compared with other types such as liberalism, conservatism, communism, and socialism, but as a dimension of political culture” (p. 14) and an epiphenomenon. Despite the varying form and multiplicity of populism, every populist discourse begins by dividing a society into two camps: “the people” and “the establishment.” It then hails and invents populous (the people) by encouraging “a sense of shared identity among different groups within a society, and facilitates their mobilization toward a common cause” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 9). Hence, Mudde (2004) defines

populism as an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people. (p. 543)

According to Burke (1992), although defining “the people” as everyone in a particular country, or as a collective form of identity that has been very common since post-Medieval times in Europe, “the people” has always been conceptualized by inclusive and exclusive categories (p. 293). “The people” often indicates everyone in a particular city, region, or nation as opposed to other peoples; at other times, “the people” refers to members of the subordinate rather than the ruling class (Burke, 1992, p. 293). The concept is plastic, and benefits populists who can expand or contract its meaning to suit the chosen criteria, inclusion, or exclusion at any given time (Stanley, 2008, p. 107). On the moment of utterance, the definition of “the people” ineluctably becomes a coconstructive, semantic entity of the concept of “the other.” Establishing crosscutting boundaries between “the people” and their enemies is crucial for sustaining conceptualization of “the people” and “the others” in populist discourse.

Much of the debate around the phenomenon of populism centers on the vagueness of "the people" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 9). On the political right, "the people" is associated with "the nation," and both expressions are employed interchangeably (Mudde, 2004, p. 549; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 9). The antagonistic "other," whether it is the elites of the nation or the immigrants or refugees, is a fundamental category of populist politics. Populism is always about "dichotomizing the political space and drawing a new border across the political battlefield [so] populist politics creates a new 'them' against which a popular identity is produced" (Yılmaz, 2016, p. 197).

To further the divide, populist leaders strategically elicit an "us versus them" mentality (Laclau, 2005b). They use media to persuade the public with rhetoric filled with "complex identity affiliations and emotional interplay" (Block & Negrine, 2017, p. 182). Antagonistic relationships between popular masses and "the other" (or the establishment) characterize populist politics. Before I examine antagonistic, incompatible manifestations of "the people" and "the other" in the Turkish Islamist press, in the next section, I explain political populism by offering a historical local context.

Populism and Turkish Politics

Although politicians across the globe have adopted a more populist rhetoric, Turkey is not exempt from the global rise in populist politics. Populism, however, has diverse manifestations in different countries and regions. The distinct indications of populism and its discourses must be understood through analyses of specific sociopolitical and national contexts. Thus, right-wing populism in Turkey presents an interesting case for larger populism studies. According to Aytaç and Elçi (2019),

a particular attraction of the Turkish case for studies of populism is that a party with a populist agenda, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), has long been the incumbent party in Turkey. Studies about mass populist attitudes have typically focused on cases where populist actors or parties have been in the opposition, and their findings highlight discontent as a key factor in the appeal of populism. (p. 89)

Analyzing discourses of the right-wing Islamist populism in power in Turkey and its implications in the media makes a significant contribution to the studies of populism as well as media and communication studies. Therefore, in this section, I analyze the politics behind the way "the people" is defined within the sociopolitical history of Turkey.

Establishment of the Turkish Republic marked the birth of a nation-state and implementation of a modernist, secularist model in the state and society. Descending hierarchical modernization efforts and political regime change were achieved by Westernizing intellectuals and the state elites. These state elites "saw themselves as a patriotic group autonomous of all class interest" (Ahmad, 1993, p. 79). However, oppositional Islamist and conservative groups of the early Republican period claimed that they represented the nation, the "real" people of Turkey, not the secular modernists. Thus, right-wing conservative and Islamist politics have aligned with populism in Turkey since its inception.

The first and the oldest political party of modern Turkey, the Republican People's Party (CHP), was the state party of the single-party regime until 1950. Although populism (*Halkçılık*) was one of the founding principles of the republic, according to Laclau (2005a, p. 208) and Erdoğan (1998), its policies were not considered populist. Early Republicans looked back unfavorably on the elitism of the Ottoman Empire whose courtly oligarchy looked down on "the people." The new Republican regime abolished divisions such as "commons" versus "elites," and considered the concept of "people" to include the whole society (Tunc, 1941, p. 27). Political populism in Turkey dates back to the 1950s (Toprak 1992, p. 62). Its history starts with the multiparty system and, specifically, the Democratic Party (1946–1961) under the leadership of Adnan Menderes. From the 1960s to 1980s, populism grew to become a dominant political strategy of both left- and right-wing political parties and political organizations in Turkey (Erdoğan, 1998; Gülalp, 1984; Keyder, 2003). The Justice Party (AP) and the True Path Party (DYP), led by Süleyman Demirel who was elected as the prime minister several times between 1965 and 1993, successfully pursued populist policies of clientelism, state-administered patronage, the continuing structure of a state-directed economy, and a rhetorical content of political and cultural peripheralism, aimed at winning votes (Cizre Sakallıoğlu, 1996).

In the 1970s, leftist political parties and movements like the CHP and its legendary leader Bülent Ecevit embraced populist rhetoric (Kınıkoğlu, 2000), earning him the epithet "populist Ecevit" (Halkçı Ecevit). Ecevit's political slogan was "Neither oppressor nor oppressed, [we demand] an order humane and fair [Ne ezen, ne ezilen, insanca ve hakça bir düzen]." Leftist populism in the 1970s defined "people" as the oppressed groups, including working-class, peasants, romanticized folk, and powerless masses. as opposed to "the oligarchy" (Erdoğan, 1998). During the 1970s, leftist populism emphasized locality and specificity of the Turkish sociopolitical structure.

A continuum of populist politics during the 1980s and 1990s is evident, despite the interruption of the political regime by the 1980's coup d'état. After the coup, newly emerging parties such as Anavatan Partisi (Motherland Party) embraced a populist discourse based on coalition of "the people" against the ideology of the establishment (the Republican elite and the dominant classes). Under the leadership of Turgut Özal, the Motherland Party rolled conservative Islamic and liberal discourses together to create a message with populist appeal. In the 1990s and 2000s, both Islamic and secular parties survived the threat of growing populism by incorporating populist themes in their party platforms and by increasing the populist tone of their public rhetoric (Baykan, 2017).

The most recent political party to advance antagonism between the elite/the establishment and "the people" is the AKP, which rose to power in 2002. In the 2000s, Turkey experienced the rise of a populist authoritarian government and the rise of conservative Islam led by Erdoğan. According to Somer and McCoy (2018), this was a new form of authoritarian populism established by an elected government as experienced in Turkey, Egypt, and Thailand. Over the past decade, the politics of Turkey has had an authoritarian turn (Somer, 2016). The AKP has played on populist sympathies while simultaneously installing an authoritarian government.

During the 2000s, the AKP government used characteristics of populism to target specific groups, claiming that "the people" have been excluded from both mainstream politics and the political system, which resulted in the loss of sovereignty of "the people" in Turkey. By employing the discourse of anti-intellectualism, Turkey's President Erdoğan created a new image for himself as the voice of the oppressed

masses (Topcu, 2014). Aytaç and Öniş (2014) suggest that “the frequent use of anti-establishment appeals and a discourse constructing ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ as characteristics of populist rule is especially salient in the case of Erdoğan” (p. 44). For example, the right-winged populism of the AKP channeled the discourse of othering journalists, intellectuals, scholars, Kurds, and left-wing and right-wing political opponents of the AKP who compose nearly half of the population. In the next section, before I explore the relationship between populist politics and media discourse, I explain the data collection and methodology of the study.

Media of Political Islam

In a highly polarized political landscape, the Turkish press is divided into Islamic and secular newspapers (Özcan, 2015). Various Islamic newspapers have been published in Turkey since the 1950s (Dursun, 2006, p. 170). Through the 1980s, those newspapers and other Islamic media outlets gained momentum alongside liberalization of the conservative and Islamic political parties and privatization of the media (Dursun, 2006; Gül & Gül, 2000; Özcan, 2015). During the 1990s, Islamic businesses began investing in the media sector and the television industry at an accelerated pace. According to Gül and Gül (2000), in the 1990s, “circulation rates of some Islamic newspapers, magazines and journals reached unprecedented levels” (p. 1). As an example of exponential growth of Islamic media, *Türkiye Gazetesi*, founded in 1972, reached a circulation of 1,424,350 in 1983 (Milestones, 2019). According to Dursun (2006), “It can be said that the Islamist media has become one of the powerful players in the media market, not unlike the mainstream popular media in Turkey” (p. 171).

The newspaper *Yeni Şafak* flourished in the 2000s by aligning with the AKP government and its associated right-wing Islamic ideology. The daily exemplifies the conservative Islamist media, and stands in the right extreme of the political spectrum. During the presidential election week of 2018, as one of the most circulated Islamic dailies in Turkey, the paid circulation of print copies of *Yeni Şafak* was 111,625² (“Gazete Tirajları,” 2018). Although Islamist newspapers rapidly gained visibility in Turkey in the 1990s and the 2000s, *Yeni Şafak* holds a special position within the Islamist press because of its close ties to the AKP government. The newspaper is owned by Albayrak Holding, a conglomerate run by the Albayrak family and Berat Albayrak, Erdoğan’s son-in-law who is currently the Minister of Finance and Treasury. After being acquired by the Albayrak group in 1997, *Yeni Şafak* has become an ardent advocate of Erdoğan and the political opinions of the party in power. Its media ideology correlates perfectly well with the political ideology of the AKP. For instance, the Hrant Dink Foundation reported that among all Turkish newspapers, the daily was the primary source of disinformation and hate speech against progressive and secular protestors during the Gezi protest in 2013 and opponents of the AKP (“Nefret Söylemi Raporu,” 2013). The foundation’s report demonstrates that the lexical register of the newspaper overlaps with lexical choices of the government in defining Gezi opposition (“Nefret Söylemi Raporu,” 2013). Similarly, textual analysis of *Yeni Şafak* shows that the daily essentially worked like “a party newspaper”: a newspaper supporting a specific political party by excluding competing views about other parties’ agendas, events, and actions. In this way, a media source

² *Yeni Şafak* is always among the top-10 newspapers in Turkey in terms of weekly circulation. The total number of readers of print media in Turkey is relatively low compared with its population (82,003,822; “Son Dakika,” 2019). For instance, *Sabah* with 316,356 in circulation (in print only) was the top-selling newspaper between June 18 and 24, 2018 (“Gazete Tirajları,” 2018).

loses its surveillance capacity at the expense of its professional ethical values (Arvas, 2006). In the long run, the newspaper's devotion to a political party turns it into a propaganda tool (Arvas, 2006). Thus, a critical review and semiological analysis of *Yeni Şafak's* 2018 election coverage reveals whether the daily language of the newspaper is embedded with the populist discourse of the AKP, Erdoğan, and the proponents of political Islam, and how such language might constitute a media ideology.

Methodology and Data Collection

According to Fairclough (1995), "Research on media orders of discourse is of more than parochial interest, because it impinges on major changes in society and culture" (p. 63). To expose these changes and discursive interactions in contemporary societies, language, as a system of signs, requires a semiotic analysis. Semiotics, "the study of signs," has been used to develop media theory since the late 1960s (Chandler, 2002). As a qualitative approach, it interprets verbal and nonverbal signs of various texts. A sign refers to anything from which meanings may be generated (such as words, images, sounds, gestures, and objects; Chandler, 2002, p. 2). Semiotics treats linguistic texts as a system of signs and symbols that convey meanings to the readers (Evreinova, 2007). Given that signs are integral to mass communication, semiotic analysis has become an essential tool in furthering media theory. Basic signs are denotative—common and literal meanings—or connotative—sociocultural and personal associations. Mythic³ signs reinforce dominant cultural values and naturalize the current order of things. In semiotic analysis, semioticians deconstruct texts to unmask ideologies within them. I rely on semiotic analysis to investigate complex signs and decode "the systems of functional distinctions operating within" (Chandler, 2002, p. 21). and beyond the written words in *Yeni Şafak* I identify the discursive chasm between the presumed role of media—to surveil and report the news—and the actual role of *Yeni Şafak* as a purveyor of media ideology. These antagonistic qualities are revealed in paradigmatic (themes, preferred alternative signifiers, associative relations, and absent signifiers) and syntagmatic (the structural relationship between various signifiers in a framework of syntactic rules and conventions) features in *Yeni Şafak's* news stories, editorials, columns, and op-eds.

I collected data by exploring the coverage of the June 24, 2018, Turkish national elections on the website *Yeni Şafak* in June and July. To ensure comprehensive analysis, I also relied on material gathered from a range of secondary sources including national and international online news websites. This study focused on the national election coverage because of the high number of articles available from this time regarding in-group (the people/the nation/Turks, etc.) and out-group (the elites/the establishment/enemies of the nation/foreign forces/the others, etc.) distinctions. Tambar (2009) states that "attempts to constitute 'the people' are always representational efforts, and . . . parliamentary elections are one manner of conjuring a notion of the people" (p. 525). Thus, due to the increasing number of newspaper stories and editorials about "the people" before, during, and after the national elections, I collected the data from the period June 1 to July 31, 2018. By using newspaper stories, op-eds, columns, and editorials as primary sources, I incorporated articles including the query term *the people* that explicitly addressed the 2018 summer elections. This search of *Yeni Şafak* produced a total of 36 articles using the expression "the people" in the target time period. Twenty-two of those articles appeared in *Yeni Şafak Seçim* (2018; *Yeni Şafak: The Election*, a special online collection

³ For Roland Barthes, myths are the dominant ideologies of our time (Chandler, 2002, p. 93). Thus, myths make what is cultural seem natural.

of articles dedicated to the election) and 15 other news-reporting articles appeared in *Yeni Şafak* throughout the election period. This constellation of excerpts articulates the media ideology of *Yeni Şafak* as it relates to the populist political discourse promoted by the AKP and its allies.

To collect empirical data, I first marked all statements in the texts that dealt with “the people” (*halk*) in the context of the 2018 elections by using search engines that digitally archived the newspaper. Then, I investigated the related discourse strands to find interchangeable categories such as the nation (*millet, ulus*) and the Turks. To note recurring themes (repeated ideas, words, phrases, and reiterating narrative patterns), I skimmed and scanned the news content one-by-one. After a thorough review of the texts, I added a new category found in the articles: “the other.” Thus, I particularly focused on the relationship between “the people” (including the nation, the Turks, and occasionally the Muslims) and “the other” (such as the elite, the establishment, foreigners, enemies of the nation, and foreign forces). I delineated these conceptual categories by noting contextual cues that separated antagonistic camps of populist discourse in the Turkish national elections. Later, I reread all articles to revise these categories according to usage, grammar, lexicon, and semantics of words such as “the people,” “the nation,” and “the other” in the sociopolitical context of the June 2018 elections. To not miss any articles or columns, I retained keyword-based searches in the archives of the aforementioned newspapers by revisiting the websites of these dailies multiple times. Based on qualitative data collected from the newspaper’s archive, the next section examines the coverage of the 2018 national elections, and enquires about the politics of the definition of “the people” in *Yeni Şafak*.

Yeni Şafak: The Populist Leader, Islam, and “the People”

During the elections, *Yeni Şafak* manifested contradictory meanings of “the people” by using various linguistics features such as passive voices, repetitions, lexical choices, and semantic content. These features are related to complex representations of “the people” in the populist discourse of Turkish politics. For instance, on June 7, 2018, in an editorial titled “The First Step in the New System: June 2018 Presidential Election,” *Yeni Şafak* printed the expression “the people” six times. This article is one of the rare pieces in which the newspaper refers to “the people.” The editorial team heralded “the new [political] system for electing the president as the free choice of ‘the people’ in Turkey.” The article states,

With the constitutional amendment made in 2007, it was envisaged that the President would be elected by the people [in Turkey]. . . . The democratization process has begun with the transition to the election [of the President] by the people. . . . Turkey experienced one of its historical days on August 10 Turkey’s twelfth president was elected by the people for the first time. (“Yeni Sisteme İlk Adım,” 2018, paras. 3, 12)

Yeni Şafak strategically positions the interacting signifiers of democracy, transition, presidential election, and “the people” to construct a syntagmatic axis—a particular possibility of combination. The copresence of these signifiers generates the preferred meaning of the text. In the editorial, the daily claims that this election “started the era of the national popular vote [and] also initiated the democratization process [in Turkey]” (“Yeni Sisteme İlk Adım,” 2018, para. 4).

Some sectors of Turkish society may see this statement as an affront given that, in one sweeping statement, it dismisses the history of national popular voting in Turkey. The Islamic daily attempts to alter the discursive context of election day 2018 by labeling it as a milestone in the democratization of Turkey initiated “by the people” with the election of Erdoğan as president. Notably, despite the repetition of the expression “the people” in the editorial text, “the people” never appears as an active subject. The editorial team prefers the passive voice syntactic structure to emphasize the object (“the President would be elected,” “the transition to the election [of the President]”) at the expense of the subject (“the people”). Within the syntactic construction of passive voice, the editorial trivializes the subject without completely dismissing it. In doing so, *Yeni Şafak* not only underestimates the notion of “the people,” but also transforms “the people” into an instrument for regime change.

In a syntagmatic axis, a similar rhetorical device appeared in a *Yeni Şafak* editorial right after the election results were announced: “The most important result of the June 24th elections was the undisputed consolidation of the leadership of Erdoğan who was elected President again by more than 26 million voters” (“Güçlü Meclis Güçlü Hükümet,” 2018, para. 4). In this very brief statement, *Yeni Şafak* reduces benefit of suffrage to the demonstration of Erdoğan’s political power. The editors instrumentalize the will “of the people,” rendering its function to merely putting Erdoğan into power. This statement conflates the populist discourse of the AKP with the evidence of 26 million Erdoğan-supporting voters, and implies that an Erdoğan presidency is the embodiment of the national will.

Yeni Şafak gave broad coverage to the elections and dedicated an online special issue to the 2018 elections: *Yeni Şafak Seçim*. The website illustrated a timeline of political developments before, during, and after the election. On this website, “people” (*halk*) was used five times; two of those occasions were in the name of the Republican People’s Party. The nation (*millet*) appeared 35 times; yet, 31 mentions of 35 were used in *milletvekili* (deputy). Erdoğan was used 18 times, mostly referring to him as “the President Erdoğan.” Discernibly, the focal point of *Yeni Şafak Seçim* was the legislative political power (members of the parliament and the president) rather than “the people.” By emphasizing legislative authority multiple times in the discourse, instead of “the people,” *Yeni Şafak* attempted to create an analytic construct in which one dominant form of truth becomes visible and evident through the presence of a particular referent. This strategic act of political rhetoric conceals a contingent of missing or forgotten discourses such as democratic civil society, civic political rights, and culture. Fairclough (1995) says that the lack of presence, the missing voices and meanings, shows us the ideological processes manifest in the media. Therefore, in the case of *Yeni Şafak* and the political aims of the AKP, lack of media coverage (i.e., missing diverse voices and perspectives) as well as absent words and utterances (i.e., “the people”) divulge the connection between media ideology and the populist tone in this media text.

By contrast, other representations of “the people” did occur within the 2018 election period. For example, on election day, an anonymous news source gave *Yeni Şafak*’s TV channel—TVNet—the tag line Millet’in Seçimi TVNet’tte (The nation’s election is on TVNet; “Millet’in Seçimi,” 2018). “The nation’s election” (*millet’in seçimi*) can also be translated as “the choice of the nation.” This statement signifies one of the main assertions of populism: the will of “the people.” It also defines the nation as a sovereign collective body of “the people.” Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) argue that “the notion of ‘the people as sovereign’ is a common topic within different populist traditions, which functions as a reminder of the fact that the ultimate

source of political power in a democracy derives from a collective body" (p. 10). By presenting "the people"/"the nation" as a powerful sovereign entity, *Yeni Şafak* builds its election discourse on the populist political rhetoric of "the will of the public."

The importance of these words has been noted in Turkish press. In a news video streamed on *Yeni Şafak's* website, a journalist claimed to have "looked at the most frequently used words in the 64 days of election campaigns by the leaders" ("64 Günde Liderler," 2018) and to have found that the words most commonly used by Erdoğan were "the nation" followed by "the powerful parliament" (*güçlü Meclis*), and "the service" (*hizmet*). However, according to *Yeni Şafak*, none of Erdoğan's political opponents used "the nation" or "the parliament" in their speeches. It is ironic that *Yeni Şafak*, which gave such extensive coverage to Erdoğan's speeches and argumentations, skipped the most recurring wording of his discourse: "the nation"/"the people." It is important to note the lexical choices of the daily and its relatively low number of news articles signifying "the people" and/or "the nation" in coverage of the general elections.

In a *Yeni Şafak* article that appeared after the election, the newspaper gave voice to progovernment agents. In an interview, İhsan Aktaş, an AKP proponent and the president of the polling firm GENAR, evaluated the election results for *Yeni Şafak* (Aktaş, 2018). Here, Aktaş (2018) inferred the meaning of the election for the future of the political parties, stating, "The significance of leaders will increase [in politics]. . . . The prominence of the parties will decrease a little more and the importance of leaders will increase even more so" (para. 2). According to Aktaş, in the June elections, the citizens gave "a clear message to the AK Party" by "not supporting the AK Party in elections, in the way that they supported Erdoğan. Thus, he surpassed his party's votes" (para. 2). Here, *Yeni Şafak* mobilized a typical populist discourse: the indispensability of populist leadership. In populist politics, the leader's identity plays a significant role in facilitating the support of "the people." Discussing different populist regimes, Robert Barr (2009) specifies populism as "a mass movement led by an outsider or maverick seeking to gain or maintain power by using anti-establishment appeals and plebiscitary linkages" (p. 38). In an interview, Aktaş emphasizes the people's criticism of the party, while simultaneously substantiating the people's demands for Erdoğan's leadership. He separates Erdoğan from the politically unsuccessful AKP. In doing so, Aktaş not only takes the responsibility for the failure of the party off the shoulders of Erdoğan, but also creates an image of true populous leadership for Erdoğan that transcends the boundaries of political institutions. This image was built on previous discourses regarding Erdoğan. True to populist tactics, Erdoğan effectively used an antiestablishment discourse to capture and restore power through elections and popular support. Erdoğan crafted an antiestablishment image for himself. As a maverick who fought for "the people," Erdoğan went to battle against the Republican state elites and Westernized secularists who occupied a minority position in Turkish society. For Aytaç and Öniş (2014), Erdoğan was "outside the mainstream political community during the crisis-ridden 1990s and became known to the public after being elected as the mayor of Istanbul" (p. 44) in 1994. However, according to Erdoğan's official website biography, ("Biyografi," 2018), he was actively involved in political movements during the 1970s and 1980s, and was a prominent figure in the close circuit of Islamic politics. Erdoğan's populist success relied on his rhetorically imprinted public image of marginality, as well as his use of the victim discourse. Erdoğan affected these positions by depicting himself as a Muslim victim of the secular Republican institutions and elites. Erdoğan created a public self-image for himself and for his party based on a populist rhetoric in which he confined the definition of "the people" to his so-called oppressed Muslim identity at the expense of religious minorities and nondenominational Muslims.

A similar discourse created a semantic referential between Muslims and Erdoğan in *Yeni Şafak* a month before elections. A May 2018 op-ed written by the current CEO of Albayrak Holding, Ömer Bolat, asserts,

The election of June 24, 2018 will be the election for those who will choose between [two parties]: (1) The People's Allies (Cumhur İttifakı) and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan who takes [Muslims] under his wings, who fights for the cause of Palestine-Jerusalem, and who embraces the oppressed, victims, and the masses of people who have always been slaughtered in Muslim geographies, (2) [thick] skulls who insults our ancestors, the Ottomans, who have problems with Islamic values, and who despise aid to the oppressed and victims with racist expressions. (Bolat, 2018, para. 9)

By elevating Erdoğan as the representative of oppressed people, particularly Muslims, Bolat implies a syntagmatic relation between the two signifiers (the president of Turkey and Muslim victims). Concurrently, he mobilizes the prevalent discourse of the AKP government and Erdoğan. Bolat references an incidence of prejudicial bias that previously landed Erdoğan in prison. In 1997, Erdoğan recited a religious poem in public and served a four-month sentence for inciting religious hatred. Although the event only increased his popularity among his supporters, Erdoğan used this self-victimization rhetoric many times during his tenure as the prime minister and continued to exploit it for political ends after inauguration to the presidency. In his statement, Bolat creates a public self-image for Erdoğan and his political allies (*Cumhur İttifakı*) by broadening the definition of "the people." By linking people imaginatively to a narrower category (the Muslims), Bolat creates a paradigmatic axis among alternative signifiers including "the people," "the nation," the Muslims, and the oppressed.

In this opinion piece, Bolat (2018) frames the 2018 national elections as a response to oppression on a national level, aligning himself with populist themes of the AKP while dismissing the claims of "the people" in the opposition camp. The discourse polarizes Erdoğan, the People's Allies, and their supporters against the "[thick] skulls" belonging to their political enemies. Bolat's statement implicitly and explicitly refers to Republican elites ("[those] who insult the Ottomans"); Turkey's secularists ("[those] who have problems with Islamic values"); and oppositional political parties, groups, and minorities ("[those] who despise aid to the oppressed with racist expressions"). The op-ed retrospectively defines the antagonistic "other" in the nation (*iç mihraklar*) as the enemy of the oppressed (i.e., Muslims) by successfully marginalizing opponents to "the people."

Politics in Turkey is grounded in political polarizations. The discursive constructions of "the people" as a nation (the true Turks/the true people) and a religious community (Muslims) play a significant role in creating antagonisms in the society to demonize "the others." In this way, anyone who opposes Erdoğan's authoritarian governance may be marginalized. According to Özdamar and Ceydilek (2019), "Radical right populism establishes its thin-centered ideology upon the promise that they will support the 'rightful' and 'true' members of the community at the expense of various others" (p. 78). "The others" (intellectuals, elites, minorities, oppositional movements, etc.) are not the "true" people of the nation and, despite their citizenship, do not deserve to be part of the nation. The lines *Yeni Şafak* draws in sociopolitical space divide antagonistic categories of populist discourse: pitting the dominant culture of Islamist philosophy against all other constituencies in the political "other." In doing so, the daily creates, maintains, and disseminates

populist narratives regarding the "the people" versus the establishment, the nation versus the elites, the Turks versus Western nations, and Muslims versus non-Muslims. This kind of discourse contributes to widening societal polarization in politics and in the media of Turkey.

Conclusion

In this study, I used semiotic analysis of the news stories, op-eds, columns, and editorials to investigate media discourse and conceptualization of "the people" in the far-right, politically conservative Islamist Turkish daily *Yeni Şafak* through the coverage of the most recent national elections in Turkey. Populism, as a major force in Turkish politics, manifested in the discourse of the Islamist press during the 2018 elections when the right-wing progovernment newspaper incorporated media ideology through populist signifying practices.

In the newspaper stories, op-eds, columns, and editorials, "the people" appeared mostly within the phrase "Republican People's Party," the name of the major party holding opposition to Erdoğan's election. "The people" appears to be the missing link in the political discourse of *Yeni Şafak*. When the expression "the people" appeared in the daily and referenced citizens of Turkey, their presence was placed in passive voice, not as active subjects. Through passive voice sentences and indirect mention, "the people" became instrumental in regime change (from the parliamentary system to the presidential one), and true democracy was reduced to the simple act of voting. *Yeni Şafak* limited "the will of the people" to the electoral process. Thus, the focal point of the daily's discourse was the legitimization of political power, particularly the power of President Erdoğan. Moreover, *Yeni Şafak* consistently delivered Erdoğan's populist political discourse to the public. Erdoğan declared that "his authority derives from the will of the people, marking his direct elected position through exhibition as 'the candidate of the people'" (Erçetin & Erdoğan, 2018, p. 387). These rhetorical conventions constitute a syntagmatic axis that creates associative relations between "the people" and Erdoğan and present Erdoğan as the true leader of the populous. In so doing, *Yeni Şafak* reconfigured populist discourses of the ruling party to impose a new semantic referent between "the people" and Erdoğan to reinforce the self-imposed position of the president and the government as the genuine representatives of "the people." *Yeni Şafak* also presented Erdoğan as the initiator of Turkey's democracy and as the epitome of the national will. In alignment with populist right-wing perspectives, the daily encompassed and reinforced a typical populist ideology: reducing democracy to plebiscite, rather than active, political participation regarding the political processes in civil society. In doing so, the daily has instrumentalized "the people" and prioritized the strong leader myth in conjunction with AKP populism.

Furthermore, polarization has become the determinant of all semantic and pragmatic horizons of discourse in the daily. In other words, "the people" and its enemies determine the discursive field in Turkish politics under authoritarian populism. To associate "the people" with both the right-wing and Islam, *Yeni Şafak* stigmatized oppositional movements and groups including secular people, elites, progressive public intellectuals, and other left- and right-wing political parties. *Yeni Şafak* conceptualized "the people"/"the nation" as a polarized populist category and defined this concept as contrary to the national/the internal "other." As a result, the daily sought to divide Turkish society by coalescing a strong, antagonistic polarity into social and discursive spaces.

Reverberating Erdoğan's and the AKP's populist linguistic choices and discursive rhetoric, *Yeni Şafak* used "the people" as a sociopolitical signifying category that is highly interchangeable with the concepts of "the nation," "the Muslims," "the oppressed," and "the people" of the Middle East and Islamic geographies. Turkey presents an interesting articulation of right-wing populism and nationalist and Islamist discourses. Considering that Muslims are sometimes the targets of right-wing populism in Western societies, we see, in the case of the 2018 election, how oppositional forces were created and maintained as constructs of "the people" within Turkey. *Yeni Şafak* mobilized the populist discourse of the AKP government, broadened the definition of "the people" according to its Islamist agenda by referring to a global category beyond the nation-state (i.e., Muslims), and, simultaneously, confined the definitions of "the people" and "the other" (i.e., true citizens vs. [thick] skulls/the internal or national others) to the context of the 2018 Turkish election.

In conclusion, by interpellating "the people" with populist Islamic ideologies, right-wing and Islamist media created unyielding divides in Turkish society. Particularly, *Yeni Şafak* served as a key figure in politicizing the definition of "the people" with a populist agenda and its media ideology created, disseminated, and mobilized the dominant populist discourse during the 2018 national elections in Turkey.

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