



NEWS & VIEWS

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Interview with Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu

I will not accept any criticism pointed at Republican People's Party over a conversation fueled by "rakı"!

He did not make any remarks after the 37th Ordinary Congress of CHP, the Republican People's Party. Some candidates made it to the Party Assembly lists as wild cards, while some were crossed-out unexpectedly in the last minute. To top it all, when Muharrem İnce made harsh statements against Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and announced that he would start a movement in the party, all eyes turned once again to CHP.

İpek Özbey

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While snap elections were the talk of the town in Ankara, leader of CHP, the Republican People's Party, was criticized for not reacting strongly enough to the debates over Hagia Sophia, for pulling the party to the right and for being the "one-man" of opposition. Rumors of Abdullah Gül being considered as candidate in the 2023 presidential elections also became increasingly loud. The one person to respond to all these polemics was the chairperson of CHP. He finally broke his silence and all we had to do was ask him our questions.

Photos: Necati Savaş

- We meet again after yet another extremely controversial period. First the party congress, then the polemics on Nation Alliance, and finally Muharrem İnce stepping in... As the party administration, you issued a statement and responded to the allegations. Will you be taking disciplinary action against Muharrem İnce?

No, not at this stage.

- Well, at what stage then?

We would not want to keep anyone in the party, if they are doing harm to the party.

- Is Muharrem İnce harming CHP? Who benefits from all this turmoil?

I would like to leave it to the public to appreciate that.

- İnce accused you of being the "one-man" of the opposition. You received similar criticism during the congress period. Is that right, are you really the "one-man"?

First of all, I would like to say that the congress took place in an extremely pleasant atmosphere. We complied with all the requirements of the pandemic conditions. We did not receive any complaints at all from anyone, including the members of the press. Everything was conducted according to the rules and requirements. It has also been a highly successful congress in terms of its discourse. Some people criticized us saying, "Why are you organizing the congress now?". We organized it when an announcement was released saying "Parties can hold their congresses". It was because we were projecting that the picture could get worse in autumn, and time has actually proven us right. Turkey might face a much gloomier picture in terms of Covid-19 in the coming period.

- Looking at the overall picture, we see that there is no such resistance in any other political party towards its leader. Why is it that there is always a movement, an intra-party opposition within CHP?

Because this is what democracy is all about, this is how it is supposed to be. It is our historical responsibility to tolerate all criticism, all opposition unless it is done for self-interest, for personal gain. Because Republican People's Party is one of the main pillars and foundation stones of Turkey. CHP is the home of the political establishment of our Republic, which was founded by the great leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. CHP is the party that introduced the multi-party political system in our country. Now we are marching towards a new revolution. We will crown our Republic with democracy on its hundredth anniversary. So, if we are defending democracy, we need to be democratic within the party first. If the criticisms are wrong, we provide the necessary response; if not, we learn our lesson from them. If we do not do this, we would be acting against our founding philosophy. Our main philosophy is to ensure the independence of the country, achieve economic growth, transition to multi-party system, and crown the Republic with democracy. Therefore, we cannot deviate from this direction. This is the direction embraced and internalized by millions. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who set this direction for us, talked about attaining and

transcending modern civilization. You can transcend modern civilization with knowledge, with science. You can transcend it with your universities, with your human resources, with a strong economy. This is how you can build a country that is well-respected around the world. If you want the Turkish lira to appreciate, the way to do it is through production. It was again Mustafa Kemal and his friends who knew how valuable production was for the independence of the country. During the most difficult times when



they had to shoulder all the debt remaining from the Ottoman Empire, they crowned the victories they won on the battlefield with economic victories; from defense industry to sugar, paper and iron and steel factories. These economic victories helped Turkey gain respect on a global scale. In summary, I consider the criticisms and opposition within the party from the perspective of democracy. Like I said, this is how it is supposed to be. Since such an approach does not exist in many political parties, since loyalty to the leader is associated with fear and the leaders themselves personally do not like any criticism, it is only natural that the critical mentality that I am trying to ingrain in CHP is considered strange. However, Turkey will overcome all this.

- Speaking of dissidents in your party... Selin Sayek Böke was part of the team who criticized you and started a movement against you. It was highly surprising that she got elected as Secretary-General. What was your motivation for this decision?

One does not need any special motivation. Ms. Böke is a fellow member of our party. She is successfully representing our country and party at the Council of Europe. Just because we used to, and maybe still disagree on some issues, does not mean we cannot work together with Ms. Böke, or with many other colleagues for that matter. If you want to achieve the goals that I have just listed, you need to become partners. You need to work together. When you banish people just because they criticize you, when you demonstrate animosity, anger and bias to them saying "You no longer belong here", then what you do is not called "politics" in the first place. Politics is not a field where you can rule with animosity and anger. On the contrary, politics requires a ruling mentality where you know how to draw lessons from the criticism you receive. Only if you do so, you can succeed. Among my friends who used to oppose me in the past, who signed and voted for other candidates and not for me in the congress, there are those who are still serving as members of the parliament, as mayors or in the administrative bodies of our party. We are together. When you internalize democracy, you find these things normal.

- So you find it normal and you do not get furious at all, is that so?

Yes, exactly. I do not get furious at all; I never hold a grudge against anyone. From time to time, I even get criticized by my closest friends for never getting angry, for being able to

and enjoying working with people who have once pointed the harshest criticisms at me.
(laughs)

- You appointed Tuncay Özkan as senior advisor, even though he could not make it to the Central Executive Board and was left out of the Party Assembly during the congress. Why is Tuncay Özkan such an indispensable party member to you?

No, like I just said, when you internalize democracy, when you care about merit, then no one is indispensable. This applies to all positions and appointments. Let me carefully underline that first. In today's circumstances, Mr. Özkan was the best available colleague to serve as senior advisor for media and communication issues. We assigned him a task in that context. Otherwise, it would not be correct to push him outside the party or seek for another option just because he was "not elected". I noticed that he was working hard. He was receiving serious criticism but still he was not responding to any of these on any TV channel. He just kept doing his job. Therefore, he will continue serving in this field.

- At this point, I need to remind you the statement of Canan Kaftancıoğlu, İstanbul Provincial Chairperson of your party, who said right before the congress: "I did not want Tuncay Özkan to be on the list". Is there a problem?

I already said I disapproved of that.

- Did you consider it as intervening in your affairs?

No, I just said I did not approve, that's all.

- Let's also talk about your "friends": You stated that everyone who agrees on the 13 points you listed is your ally. Now we know what you agree upon, but as CHP, what are your divergence points? After all, you are not acting as a single party, we are talking about an alliance...

We need to analyze the process from the very beginning. If you absolutely are looking for a milestone, since the campaign for the referendum of April 16, we have come together with various political, social, and cultural fractions who are normally distant to CHP for different reasons. Our primary goal was to cast aside our mutual prejudices. That was a process of getting to know each other and even giving our blessings to each other, without any political expectations. The success of Nation Alliance in the last two elections is the result of these prejudices being broken down. This is how we were able to win the local elections in İstanbul, Ankara, Adana, Mersin, and Antalya. After this, during the Covid-19 process, I wrote an article with the title "A Call for Building a Humble Civilization". In that article, I put forward a brand new economic and political approach for both Turkey and the world. Then we made a "Call for Coming Out of Depression". And most recently, during the congress we announced our "Call for the Second Century Declaration". The 13 points we refer to in the declaration, are not any random or ordinary points. These are the points that describe the future of Turkey and express the road map for our government which we will form with our friends. I also stated it in the congress: Anyone who signs under these 13 points is our ally. We received a lot of reactions from government circles, and I understand it, they are panicking. Because they also see that they will lose power. Ms. Özbey, the elections will be



held in 2023 at the latest, and we will come to power, with our friends. Therefore, by 2023 at the latest we will be in power together with our friends. We need to put aside the conflicts, disputes, disagreements of the past and meet on a common ground within the framework of certain principles. What are these principles? A strong democratic parliamentary system, equality

between men and women, having a state policy on eliminating violence against women, decontaminating our legal system of the *coup d'état* laws, applying the democratic rules that prevail in modern countries to our country as well, independence of judiciary, emancipating the Parliament of tutelage and reinstating the honor and dignity of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey... These are the common grounds for us... It does not matter if you are right-wing or left-wing, to agree upon these principles. Democracy is necessary for both rightists and leftists. After all, we call those who act against the principles of democracy dictators. If you are defending democracy, democratic life should prevail both for you, and for those who have dissenting views. If that is how you think, then there is no problem. That is what we call an alliance, the people we call our "friends". In other words, it is the unity of people and parties that will prepare Turkey for the "second century" and make it powerful not only in its region but also in the world. That is how I see it.

- Some people think that with these alliances you are pulling CHP towards right-wing, what would you say to that?

This is one of the most ridiculous things I have ever heard in my life. Imagine you make sure that the intra-party democracy which I just referred to actually functions, you bring the subcontracted workers high on the agenda, you work day and night for janitors, women, young people, workers. Imagine you march from Ankara to Istanbul for justice. Imagine you fight for justice for all and in every walk of life, and then people will come up and say, "CHP is shifting towards right". Most of the leftists who raise such criticisms are only "so called" leftists; just like the pseudo Kemalists, they are pseudo leftists, pretending to be engaged in petty leftism. No one even thought of those fellow citizens until we started asking for "permanent positions for subcontracted workers". No one was even asking "There are hundreds of thousands of subcontracted workers in this country, how about their rights?". I wonder if those raising this criticism ever thought of giving two salaries as a bonus to pensioners. Did they ever think of bringing the forest villagers, who are the poorest segment of this society, to the agenda of the country? Those who raised this criticism, did they even know about the problems of the janitors of their own buildings? We have shown extreme sensitivity and taken care of all segments of the society who have never been taken care of before. Now please tell me, what does all that have to do with being a rightist? I would never think that criticizing the Republican People's Party over a conversation fueled by "raki" is fair, and I would never accept such criticism. I only pay attention to those who criticize CHP sincerely. Because I believe there are things that I can learn from them. But I do not find it sincere when people groan just because they are not assigned a position. Such

people cannot make good friends, nor can they be of any service to the party or to the country for that matter.

- For instance, you were criticized for not reacting strongly enough during the opening of Hagia Sophia. Some people even said you did not defend Atatürk who was targeted during the ceremony. Well, you did not react loud enough indeed...

Ms. Özbey, let me explain why I did not react, but before that, let me ask you the following: who are these people who are criticizing us for not reacting about Hagia Sophia for God's sake? A small group who are too detached from the reality of the country that they cannot even be taken seriously. This has nothing to do with defending Atatürk. Every member of CHP would defend Atatürk rigorously and with determination. It is Atatürk's thoughts that illuminate the path of every CHP member. No one should ever doubt that. The issue of Hagia Sophia was a trick, it was about playing politics with a holy place like Hagia Sophia. Indeed, Erdoğan opened Hagia Sophia for his own interests, in an attempt to stop his political downfall. We did not fall for that trick.

- Did you use to, in the past?

Yes, indeed. They knew exactly how we would react when they said something. They built their entire policies on this, but now we spoiled their game. Now when they do something, they see that we do not give the reaction they were expecting from us. And then, they are unable to explain this to their own constituents. CHP now, is no longer the CHP we had in the past. They can no longer say: "See, this is CHP, they oppose everything". On the contrary, we evolved into a different position now. The country has its problems, and we explained, point by point, how these problems could be solved. Right at the outset of the economic crises back in August 2018, we held a press conference and explained in 13 points how we can come out of the crisis. Currently, we are going through a period of depression and we also prepared a road map to show how we can overcome this depression, we made a Call for Coming Out of Depression. Therefore, we are no longer a party that constantly criticizes everything, but we are a party that is now explaining to masses how we can solve the problems of Turkey. And I am so proud of this.

- For instance, concerning what happened in Hagia Sophia: President of Religious Affairs took out a sword and he targeted Atatürk. How did you interact with your alliance partners at that moment? Did you immediately start calling each other? Did you determine a road map saying, "We will show our reaction this way"?

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk is a shared value for all of us, for everyone who has a conscience. When he was fighting the National War of Independence, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk fought together with his friends who did not necessarily share his thoughts. Dissidences started later on. And Mustafa Kemal listened and followed them carefully. We have a tradition of keeping the Presidency of Religious Affairs and General Staff out of politics in this country. It has always been like that; it is a traditional attitude. It is by no means acceptable that the Presidency of Religious Affairs excludes and targets Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. I also explained this in the group meeting. We are going through times when we appreciate the value of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk better, and further respect his foresight. Let me give you an example. We are talking about Generation Z, right? No matter what letter of the alphabet

you use to name them, the young people today are the young people that Mustafa Kemal aspired to see and defined years ago. Remember what he said: "Free minds, clear conscience and filled with wisdom". Today's youth are the generation that corresponds exactly to this description. They want freedom in all walks of life, they do not want to be restricted. That is why they are not yielding to the oppressive, restrictive, and prohibitive policies of the "Palace" government. In any case, it is our duty to provide them these spheres of freedom.

- Are there any opponents of Atatürk in CHP?

Absolutely no. Never!

- Among the allegations is that, for the Party Assembly, you selected names who could work in harmony with Ali Babacan, leader of Democracy and Progress (DEVA) Party. Is the expansion of Nation Alliance, with participation of Mr. Babacan and Mr. Davutoğlu, in the pipeline?

These are not allegations that one could take seriously. For that matter, to me these are not even allegations at all. Even an allegation would have some weight, some credibility in it, which is not the case here. Would the Nation Alliance be expanded? Well, only time will tell, I cannot say anything today. Both parties in question are currently at establishment phase. Just like you, the journalists, are following them carefully, we as politicians are also following them closely. Commenting on this issue would above all be disrespectful to those two parties. Ultimately, these are two separate political parties established by people who served in the country administration for long years. Along the process, they will complete building their political identities.

- So, I understand you have no prejudice...

We are not prejudiced against anyone, and we should not be either... We should be looking at the future and considering people's principles. Not the conflicts, disputes, and disagreements of the past. If we are in a different position than in the past, and if that position requires parliamentary democracy, transparency, scrutiny, merit, independence of judiciary, justice for all and in every walk of life, equity, ending favoritism and extravagance, jobs and bread for all, a social state where no child goes to bed hungry, and ending informal economy; then we cannot afford to be prejudiced against anyone. You should not judge people by the mistakes and failures of the past. We are not prejudiced against AK Party (Justice and Development Party) either. If they were to look at their own founding principles and their party program, they would indeed see that what they are doing today is the exact opposite of what is written in the founding program. They totally deviated from it. Actually, there exists no such party as AK Party today. There is only one person. Only Erdoğan. Can anyone come up and tell Erdoğan "Sir, you are making a mistake here"? No, they cannot. If Erdoğan were to say, we will hold the Parliamentary meeting at minus five degrees today, no one would dare to object, they would all say yes. It is not a party, it is an Erdoğan Club. Once Erdoğan leaves, the party will disappear.

THEY ARE AFRAID OF ABDULLAH GÜL

- Mr. Kılıçdaroğlu, rumor has it that you meet with former President Abdullah Gül every week and you have long conversations over the phone, and that Abdullah Gül is the presidential candidate in your heart, is that true?

When he was president, Mr. Abdullah Gül invited me periodically to the Presidential Palace, and wanted to hear about Turkey and Turkey's problems from our perspective. And I would convey him our observations, and these meetings were not held in secret. He wanted to maintain a tradition that all states should possess. Why? Because the president is the assurance of the State, who also vows for impartiality. On the day he left his office, he came to our headquarters, we said our goodbyes and bid him farewell. We do not have any disputes, and in the past, when need be, we also criticized him I have to say. After he left office, most recently Mr. Gül called me to express his condolences for my sister's death. I thanked him. That was the last time we talked. Those who claim that we "meet every week" or who come up with similar other allegations, are individuals who act under the guidance of certain people and they are also deranged.

- Well, have you considered Abdullah Gül as presidential candidate then?

Let me put it this way: We did not receive any such proposal. I have no idea how these rumors were put about. Of course, Abdullah Gül can run for presidency if he wishes to do so. You cannot just say "No you cannot run"...

- Of course he can run, but would he run as your party's candidate?

We did not receive such a proposal. It does not make any sense to provide an opinion on something that does not exist. The question is: Why are they afraid of Abdullah Gül so much?

- Maybe, it is not that they are afraid of Mr. Gül, but some people think choosing Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu as candidate was not the right decision and people might be fearing that the same mistake will be made again...

Ms. Özbey, if Mr. İhsanoğlu were the president today, the Middle East would not be in such a mess. Mr. İhsanoğlu is one of the rare scholars raised in Turkey. He is a Turkish scholar receiving awards from other countries and there are international competitions organized on his name, still we were not able to get across the message. People had their procedures, etc. You may or may not agree with his world view, but even today, I have no doubts about Mr. İhsanoğlu's respectability.

- So do you think they are afraid of Abdullah Gül?

Well, if they keep bringing him on the agenda so often, it only indicates that they are.

- Don't you desire to be the president?

We have an alliance and we call it the "Nation Alliance". When you make an alliance, you take such decisions together with the leaders of that alliance. If you just say, "I will do it my way", then it is not an alliance. This is the rational answer, with no prejudices. There is no personal expectation or relationship of interest in it. This answer serves for the ideal of a Turkey finally being emancipated. I would like to underline the following: If need be, everyone should make sacrifices! Because there is nothing more valuable than Turkey.

- So if necessary, you and your friends have to make sacrifices too, is that so?

Of course. Imagine you want to swiftly redeem Turkey from this situation and make Turkey one of the most powerful countries in the region and a respected country in the world. Who are you going to achieve this with? With your friends of course. Saving Turkey from its current situation requires more than the capacity of just one party. We need to make all our judgements taking into consideration this situation. If we have so many journalists in jail, if court decisions are clearly not being executed, and if all this is because of the government, then we all should be worried in Turkey.

- How would you comment on the call made by Mr. Bahçeli and Mr. Erdoğan to Meral Akşener, your partner in the alliance, to "come back home"?

They made this call because they also know they are on the brink of losing power. Ms. Akşener and her friends can see this.

- Do you expect snap elections?

Turkey can hardly handle all this depression until 2023, yet, they cannot go for snap elections. Because they know very well what the result of elections will be. Erdoğan's family knows the cost of losing power all too well.

- As the Chairperson of CHP, would you like to have snap elections today?

Since the local elections, we have been making all our preparations as if the general elections would be held tomorrow. If they take the decision tomorrow, we are ready.

- Let's say the elections were held today and you won. We know that your first action will be to return to parliamentary system. Then what?

We will enact the law on political ethics. We need to decontaminate politics. Appointing someone as ambassador to represent the Republic of Turkey, when all the 83 million people living in the country know that he was taking bribes, is a total disgrace to our history. When the elections are held, you will see, we will announce projects that will really put Turkey back on the rails. We will announce how these projects will be financed, how long they will

take, how much employment they will generate, with the confirmation of respectable international institutions. At the same time, we already announced our road map with the "Call for the Second Century Declaration". Without delay, we will take the necessary actions to achieve the 13 points we listed in that declaration.

HE SHOULD BRING HIS FORTUNE TO TURKEY

- You call it the Erdoğan Club. How are things on that front, in your opinion?

Terrible. It is not even an Erdoğan Club, it is an Erdoğan Family Club...

- In your most recent speeches, you keep making a call to him, to "Remove the son-in-law from office".

I want this for Turkey. Let me tell you, no opposition party in the world would do that, and no one has ever done it... We have even shown the government the way out of the crisis. Because we love our country. It was for the same reason that I said the jet-setter son-in-law should be removed from office. Up until recently, they were saying "it is because of the external powers that the dollar is appreciating against the Turkish lira". Today, they are totally claiming the opposite. They think, if they let the dollar appreciate, and Turkish lire depreciate, it will suit them better. They are lying to people. When the family ruling the country lies to its people, they have no right to occupy that position. Particularly, the supporters of AK Party, those who have a clean conscience, should think about it. Until yesterday, they were claiming that the external powers were carrying out an operation against our country, today they are saying they are happy with the situation. Is it the external powers governing them then? Why are they lying to people?

- Do you observe any change in AKP voters?

The kitchen is on fire. The citizens are now paying the price for the wrong policies of the government. Apart from a small circle prospering thanks to AKP, this is what is happening to AKP voters. Those prospering thanks to AKP are happy, as the value of dollar increases, so does their income. So does Erdoğan's fortune. 83 million people are working for the prosperity of a handful of people. AKP voters are now seeing this, they see it in their kitchen, on their dining table. I tell Erdoğan "remove the son-in-law from office" but let me tell you one more thing. If the Erdoğan family really loves their country, they should bring the fortune they have overseas to Turkey. They have billions.

- How can you be so sure?

I am totally sure, because when Trump said: "We will investigate your wealth, your assets, pull yourself together", Erdoğan did not utter a word. We know that the Erdoğan family is betraying Turkey also from a tax perspective. That was what the Isle of Man issue was about. The decree to regulate the taxation of money coming from tax havens has not been enacted since 2006 (Corporate Tax Law, Article 30/7). Because Erdoğan Family does not want to pay taxes to the Republic of Turkey.

- You say, "We will leave no one living in Turkey without an assurance for future". How will you do it?

We will do it with family support insurance. Turkey ratified the ILO Convention No.102 that provides for this type of insurance back in 1971. The convention lists nine different branches of insurance. Eight insurance branch, which is the unemployment insurance, was adopted and put into life during the rule of late Mr. Ecevit. The only insurance that is still not being implemented is the family support insurance. Once it is implemented, no individual will have any concerns for their future. Everyone will be covered by the protection of social state. 1971-2020, why is the family support insurance still not there? They have been in power as a single party for the last 18 years, why have they still not enacted this law? They provide assistance to the poor. Indeed, they are not helping the poor, they are just managing poverty. With the small amount of assistance that they provide to the poor, they make the poor people dependent on them, just to further consolidate their power. In a social state, the citizens ask the political authority to eradicate poverty. According to the Constitution, "Everyone has the right to social security", period. They act as if the right to assistance is a favor they are doing. You need to explain this to the citizens. It is the duty of the social state to find you a job, to provide you with the income to make your living. That is what social state is all about.

BIDEN SHOULD STOP PLAYING INTO ERDOĞAN'S HAND

- All of a sudden, a statement made months ago by US presidential candidate Joe Biden, who said "We should support opposition to defeat Erdoğan" resurfaced. What is your take on it?

First of all, let me be very clear about it: Joe Biden has gone way over the line. The only entity to give support to the opposition in Turkey is the nation itself. I advise him not to confuse us with other politicians, and not to confuse Turkey with other countries. Because we are a country that was established by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his friends, who once said "Independence is my character". And we do politics for the interests of our people, not for the interests of those overseas. Joe Biden should stop playing into Erdoğan's hand.