

Politics and Sufi Brotherhoods in Turkey: The Case of the Menzil Community

Abstract

The article describes the political viewpoints and the relations with the conservative Turkish political parties of the Menzil community. This religious group is one of the most important Sufi brotherhoods in modern-day Turkey and is renowned for its modest image, its wealth, and its purported links with the AKP, the country's ruling political party since 2002. The piece gives a brief history of the Menzil community and provides an overview of their social and economic profile. It then goes on to evaluate the electoral statistics of the community's place of origin. It is argued that these outcomes could be replicated in the rest of the country as well, according to studies on the voting behaviour and political mobilization of smaller religious groups. The statistics and their analysis confirm that the Menzil brotherhood has consistently voted for conservative parties, having supported both the ANAP and the AKP. The popularity of these parties within the Menzil community can be attributed to both the disciples' support for conservatism, the evolution of their social composition and tactical voting considerations.

Key words: Sufi brotherhoods, political parties, Turkey, voting behaviour, informal politics

1. Introduction

A peculiar character of Islam in Turkey is the importance of the Sufi orders (*tarikatarlar*) and communities (*cemaatler*).¹ Şerif Mardin² explains that, over the centuries, the Sufi brotherhoods³ played an essential role in spreading Islam among the Anatolian population. Furthermore, Hakan Yavuz⁴ argues that they were organisations with a prominent social role and the institution through which Islam flourished in Anatolia. In the landscape of the Turkish Sufi world, one of the most important orders is the

- 1 The term '*tarikat*' (order) refers to a Sufi order. The traditions of such a group may be very old, and its structures may extend over several regions. In addition, the group's organisation is developed around a long-lasting structure with institutional coherence and a pyramidal pattern. In contrast, the term '*cemaat*' (community, brotherhood) refers to a religious group whose spiritual tradition, based on a specific interpretation of Sufism, is derived from that of an older Sufi order. For a more detailed discussion of the terms '*tarikat*' and '*cemaat*' see Barkçin 2018 and Zarcone 2004.
- 2 Mardin 1991, 129.
- 3 In this article, the terms 'community' and 'brotherhood' are used interchangeably.
- 4 Yavuz 2004, 220.

Nakşibendiyye. Thierry Zarcone⁵ explains that the latter has always been interested in politics. Besides religion, the Nakşibendiyye has devoted itself to secular aims, mostly connected with favouring society's unity and wealth. This Sufi order is not a single group but is divided into several branches that share a common basis of rituals and traditions, centred on the recitation of the *dhikr*.⁶ However, the various offshoots often differ in internal organisation and purpose. Among them, one of the most important was the İskenderpaşa community, based in the district of the same name in Istanbul. It has become famous because it facilitated the birth and the electoral success of the first Turkish Islamist parties, of which the *Refah Partisi* (Welfare Party – RP) is the most prominent example.⁷ Indeed, politics in Turkey is often conducted through informal channels.⁸ Therefore, most political parties that arose and developed during Turkish republican history established (and maintained) unofficial relations with Sufi brotherhoods.⁹ They aimed to exploit the influences of the sheikhs¹⁰ to mobilise the population and gain votes or the support of their disciples, especially those who lived in the more peripheral areas of the state. These regions, being far from the centres of power, were very difficult to control and administer.¹¹

With the death of its most important sheikhs and the progressive loss of political success of the Islamist parties, the İskenderpaşa brotherhood lost its primacy in the Sufi landscape in Turkey. Other communities, such as the Gülen group, emerged to play as social actors and fill the distance between the state and the civil population.¹² However, a phase of decline also came for the latter, due to the corruption scandals in which it was involved¹³ and the alleged role it played in the failed coup of 15 July 2016.¹⁴ As a result, political parties have found new referents in other Nakşibendi offshoots, such as the İsmailağa and Menzil brotherhoods.

This article will therefore describe the voting dynamics of the Menzil community and its past and present relations with the political world. First, it will give a brief description of the history of the brotherhood and its leaders. It will then describe

5 Zarcone 1990, 408–9.

6 This term, which means ‘remembrance,’ ‘reminder’ or ‘mention’ indicates those devotional acts in Islam in which phrases (or prayers) are repeated. It can be counted on a set of prayer beads or through the fingers of the hand. It plays a central role in Sufism. See Le Gall 2005, 117.

7 Gülp 1999, 29.

8 See for example Guida 2013 and White 2002.

9 PMs Adnan Menderes and Süleyman Demirel both had informal contacts with the Nur brotherhood. See Zürcher 1993, 263.

10 In the context of Sufism, this term indicates a spiritual master who teaches and supervises the education of his apprentices, based on the specific religious doctrine of the brotherhood. See Yıldırım 2009, 44.

11 See for example the description of the sheikh's work as an unofficial authority in Turkish Kurdistan in Van Bruinessen 1992, 246.

12 Gulay 2007, 40–1.

13 Zürcher 1993, 357.

14 Yavuz and Koç 2018, 82.

how the social base of it has changed over the years, as the Menzil community has expanded into many sectors of the economy. The essay will continue with a description of the community's attitude towards politics, an examination of the voting behaviour of the Menzil community, a description of its relationship with certain political parties, and a possible explanation for these preferences. The essay will end by summarising the data and explaining the findings.

2. A Brief History of the Menzil Brotherhood

The Menzil community is a Sufi brotherhood whose spiritual teachings date back to the most ancient Nakşibendi-Halidi Sufi order.¹⁵ According to the Turkish social research company *Konsensus*, it is one of the largest Sufi communities in Turkey.¹⁶ It is estimated that it has hundreds of thousands of devotees, both at home and in the main places of Turkish emigration.¹⁷ The community takes its name from its place of origin: a small village called Menzil located in the Adıyaman district, in Southeast Turkey.

The community was founded by Abdülhakim El Hüseyini. He was born, in 1905, in a small village in nearby Siirt, into a Kurdish family already involved in Sufism, as both his father and grandfather were imams and sheikhs of the Nakşibendi order. The young Abdülhakim El Hüseyini also became imam of a local mosque. However, after a revelatory dream, he moved to Syria to become an apprentice of the famous Nakşibendi master Ahmet Haznevi. After four years of lessons, Sheikh Haznevi awarded him the title of *vekil*¹⁸ and the *ijaza*.¹⁹ Having completed his education, Abdülhakim El Hüseyini moved from village to village between Siirt and Bitlis to preach both Sufism and the restoration of the original Muslim faith, which according to him had become lost or altered over the centuries. Eventually, in 1969, he settled in the small village of Menzil. Soon the sheikh realised the importance of preaching to high numbers instead of having just a small group of trusted apprentices. He then managed to make himself understood and respected by locals by opening up his home to the village folk, where he preached to them. In this way, he soon became highly respected even in the neighbouring villages of Menzil and the villagers began to consider him capable of performing miracles.²⁰ He died in 1972.

15 Öztürk 2019, 143.

16 Atal and Şimşek 2006.

17 Orhan 2020, 44.

18 In this context, a representative of a sheikh who acts as a spokesperson for the Sufi community in a city or area. See Abun-Nasr 2007, 94.

19 A licence authorising its holder to transmit a text or subject, which is issued by someone already possessing such authority. It is particularly associated with the transmission of Islamic religious knowledge. In this context, it refers to a master's approval for the creation of a religious community on the part of one of his apprentices. See Graham 1993, 500.

20 Usta 1997, 56–7.

The leadership of the community passed to the sheikh's firstborn, Muhammed Raşid Erol.²¹ He was reputed to possess mystical healing abilities, which attracted many alcoholics and drug addicts hoping to be cured of their addiction. However, he denied possessing any healing powers and, while not refusing to offer them spiritual assistance, he encouraged his visitors to seek medical attention.²² As with his father, he seemed to be easily win the sympathy of pilgrims and soon the sheikh's reputation as a healer and tales of his informal attitude began to spread far beyond the borders of the nearby villages. Visitor numbers increased and the still-small Sufi brotherhood began to attract devotees from all over Turkey. Under the guidance of Muhammed Raşid Erol, the Menzil brotherhood's teaching evolved. While Abdülhakim El Hüseyini preached the restoration of pure Islam, the community's creed under his son and successor evolved into a unique synthesis of Islamic mysticism and missionary work, becoming a Sufi brotherhood that was very committed to charity work and healing. This reputation as a Sufi brotherhood particularly attentive to ordinary people, the sick and the marginalised still characterises the Menzil community and has certainly contributed to its popularity and influence among the masses.²³

The ever-increasing number of visitors to Menzil aroused the interest of the Turkish army and the local security forces, especially after the 1980 coup. In 1983, Muhammed Raşid Erol was sent into exile, accused of having dubious relations with the nationalist movement. Only three years later was he allowed to return to Menzil, thanks to the personal intervention of the then Prime Minister Turgut Özal. In 1991, an attempt was made on his life by an attacker who managed to get close to him during a public ceremony and who, with the excuse of kissing his hands, took the opportunity to prick him with a poisoned needle. The sheikh was immediately rescued and survived the attack. There are still many theories regarding the motives and the actual course of events,²⁴ but the poison by which he was struck undermined his already fragile health and he died two years later.

After Muhammed Raşid Erol's demise, a split emerged between his younger brother Abdülbaki and his son Fevzeddin over the leadership of the Menzil community. While the latter wanted to concentrate on spiritual matters and continue his father's charitable work, Abdülbaki Erol planned to expand the community's activities to increase its wealth and prestige. Fevzeddin Erol eventually decided to leave Menzil and settled in a completely new community called Bukhara, in the vicinity of Eskişehir, in northwestern Turkey. Today, he has nothing more to do with the Menzil community but claims to have maintained cordial relations with his uncle's family.²⁵

21 Muhammed Raşid acquired the surname Erol, a patronymic still used by his family. Nonetheless, his nephews Muhammed Saki and Muhammed Mübarek use to sign their works as 'Elhüseyini' or 'El Hüseyini,' like their grandfather.

22 Çakır 1990, 72.

23 Yıldırım 2009, 57.

24 Saetov 2018, 60.

25 Öztürk 2019, 44.

Abdülbaki Erol remained the leader of the Menzil community until his death on 12 September 2023. Despite the reverence his devotees bestowed upon him during his lifetime, the sheikh did not leave the same mark on the spiritual teachings of the brotherhood as his predecessors, his teachings failing to deviate from that blend of Sufism and solidarity developed by his late brother.

After the passing of its historical leader, the new head of the brotherhood is Sheikh Muhammad Saki Erol. He is the son of the deceased sheikh and was already in charge of carrying out all the public activities and affairs of the brotherhood outside Menzil. He is also a very prolific author of books on both religious and ethical topics.

3. The 'Popular' Identity of the Menzil Community and Its Network of Economic Activities

The Menzil brotherhood is famed in Turkey for its its humble and popular attitude, its wealth, and the network of activities and businesses that it has established.

Despite the fact that the brotherhood is a very large group, the community leaders still rely on a simple, informal and popular image. In this regard, Niyazi Usta²⁶ reports that, from the very start, the social composition of the Menzil brotherhood reflected the conditions of its place of origin: most of its apprentices were peasants or villagers, often poor and illiterate. When Menzil became famous as a rehabilitation centre, drug addicts and alcoholics began to become apprentices in the community.²⁷ This lack of rigor in the selection of students, which is accompanied by other informal and inclusive attitudes on the part of the community's spiritual leaders, is a distinctive feature of the community and helped to establish the Menzil as a Sufi brotherhood very attentive to the needs of the ordinary people. In this way, it was unlike other religious orders that carefully selected their members from the elites of Turkish society (see, for example, the attitude of the İskenderpaşa community in this regard).²⁸ Even today, a percentage of the community's devotees come from the lower strata of the Turkish population, attracted mainly by its social activities and facilities.²⁹ In this respect, and even if in reality the social composition of this brotherhood has diversified over time, Menzil still has the reputation of a 'people's brotherhood'.³⁰

It cannot be denied that, at first sight, the attitude of the Menzil community towards its students may indeed appear suspicious, resembling that of a cult.³¹ In this regard, apart from the obvious differences between a Sufi order and a cult, the

26 Usta 1997, 109.

27 Öztürk 2019, 70.

28 Heper 2013, 147.

29 Dede 2016, 44–6.

30 Öztürk 2019, 176.

31 'Cult' is a term used pejoratively in the English language in most contexts, and indicates a group, usually led by a charismatic and self-appointed leader who controls its members and demands unwavering devotion to a set of beliefs and practices. Examples of cults include the Peoples Temple or the Aum Shinrikyo sect. See Richardson 1993.

description of which is beyond the scope of this article, it should be noted that such specific accusations have never been levelled at the Menzil brotherhood – not even by its fiercest detractors. The Menzil community's focus on the marginalised and its special emphasis on charity work are indeed mirrored in other charity organisations in the Islamic sphere, some of them belonging to other Sufi orders and communities,³² as they are inspired by the very principles of Islam (see the concept of '*sadaqah*').³³ On the other hand, the emphasis on the informal nature of the Menzil community, its humble image and its focus on assisting the needy and marginalised have enabled it to stand out in the panorama of Sufi communities in Turkey, attracting the sympathy of many devout Muslims and a significant number of students and supporters.

Although the community emphasises a humble and popular image, it should be noted that since the 1990s, Menzil has also become known for acquiring respectable wealth. After Sheikh Abdülbaki Erol arrived at the helm of the community, in particular, this brotherhood has progressively established a network of businesses and organisations that have helped to make it one of the richest and most powerful groups in the Sufi landscape in Turkey.³⁴

The origin of the brotherhood's wealth is unclear but it is partly derived from the sale of crops harvested from the village's farmland.³⁵ While several of the businesses it has established may result in significant profits, it must be noted that their publications and books are not widely circulated, except among apprentices who belong to the brotherhood itself. Moreover, the Menzil community does not sell advertising space in its magazines or on its television networks.³⁶ Additional incomes are generated through donations made by pilgrims and apprentices of the community.³⁷ Rahman Dağ and Ali Rıza Kılıç have argued that the brotherhood may profit from its relations with politicians, who make it easier for it to obtain subsidies and favour the construction of the village's infrastructure.³⁸

In the 1980s, the magazine *Erkekçe* had already attempted (unsuccessfully) to trace the origin of the Menzil brotherhood's richness.³⁹ The journalistic investigation found that even Sheikh Muhammed Raşid Erol himself did not know the real source of his

32 See for example the counterpart of the Beşir Derneği established by the İsmailağa community, the *İsmailağa Degahi* (İsmailağa Charity Association) or the *Suffa Vakfı* (Suffa Pious Foundation) associated with the Nur brotherhood.

33 In the Islamic context, *sadaqah* is charity given voluntarily, thus distinguishing it from *zakat*, which is a religious duty of Muslims. See Abu-Nimer 2006, 145.

34 Atal and Şimşek 2006.

35 Usta 1997, 111.

36 The author analysed three magazines *Semerkind*, *Semerkind Aile* ('Semerkand for the family') and *Mostar*, which are published by *Semerkind Yayınları* (Semerkand Publications). The analysis has revealed that the only advertisements present in these magazines are for products and services owned or operated by *Semerkind Yayın Grubu* (Samarkand Media Group) or other businesses that are part of the Menzil community network.

37 Usta 1997, 111.

38 Dağ and Kılıç 2019, 220–1.

39 Çakır 1990, 73.

wealth.⁴⁰ A similar naïveté can still be found in his descendants, who claim to not know exactly where their income comes from and even assert that they are unaware of the exact amount of their wealth.⁴¹ It could be thus alleged that the economic management of the Menzil community does not depend on the orders or decisions of the spiritual leaders, who may be unaware of all the affairs in which the community is involved.

However, a more in-depth analysis of the sources of wealth of the Menzil community is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that the community undoubtedly possesses many resources to fund its initiatives and that its incomes derive from sources whose precise origin cannot be outlined.

The enterprises associated with the Menzil community are quite diverse, but the most important among them are:

1. A *vakıf* (pious foundation), the *Semerkind Vakfı* (Samarkand Pious Foundation).
2. A media group combining a television channel, a radio station and a publishing house, the *Semerkind Yayın Grubu* (Samarkand Broadcast Group).
3. A charity association, the *Beşir Derneği* (Beşir Association).
4. A network of schools and dormitories, the *Biltek Okulları* (Biltek Schools).
5. A business association, the *Tüm Sanayici ve İş Adamları Derneği* (Association of All the Manufacturers and Businessmen – TÜMSİAD).
6. A network of private hospitals, whose flagship is the *Emsey Hastanesi* (Emsey Hospital) in Istanbul.

According to the brotherhood leaders, the expansion of community activities to many different economic sectors responds to both devotional and organisational purposes. Concerning the first aspect, as the community places great emphasis on missionary work and charity, it would have created special entities – such as the pious foundation, the charity association and the hospitals – to extend the provision of these services to a larger number of needies and fulfil its mission. Even with the creation of a mass media group, the purpose would be exclusively devotional: through publications or television programmes, the community intends to get the sheikh's preaching across to as many students as possible, including those who can travel to Menzil to hear him in person.⁴²

Regarding the economic expansion of the Menzil community, a few considerations must be made. Since Ottoman times at least, Sufi orders have been used to establish and administer economic activities, such as pious foundations or schools.⁴³ In this respect, the Menzil brotherhood's economic development would not be such a marked anomaly.

This opening out of the Menzel community into different economic sectors has nonetheless led to some criticism, even within the Turkish Sufi landscape. Such crit-

40 *ibid.*

41 Öztürk 2019, 155.

42 Yıldırım 2009, 84.

43 Jennings 1990, 271.

icism, including that of the cousin of the current leader of the Menzil brotherhood, Fevzeddin Erol,⁴⁴ accuses the community's leading family of turning a Sufi community into a type of business enterprise that is more committed to accumulating wealth than to preaching Sufism. The inhabitants of the towns around Menzil are also very critical of the community's wealth, claiming that the economies of none of the cities or neighbouring villages benefit in the slightest from the riches accumulated in Menzil.⁴⁵

The management and operation of these enterprises are also under discussion. The Menzil community's businesses hire and employ very few professionals because part of the work activities is carried out by Sufi students who volunteer, thus providing their *hizmet*⁴⁶ for the brotherhood. Shopkeepers and managers of hotels and restaurants in Adıyaman (the nearest town to the village of Menzil) consider this practice to have an unfair advantage over local businesses and facilities, as the Menzil community saves a lot of money by not paying their employees.⁴⁷

4. Conservatism within the Menzil Community and the First Contact with Turkish Politics

In the panorama of Turkish Sufi orders, the Menzil community belongs to the conservative spectrum. In his writings, Sheikh Muhammad Saki Erol states that as the Menzil brotherhood is a branch of the Nakşbandi-Halidi order, it strictly adheres to the precepts of Sharia, without any deviation.⁴⁸ While this does not make the brotherhood a fundamentalist organisation, its disciples share a conservative mentality both in their interpretation of the Quran and in their attitude towards many social and political issues.

An analysis of the magazines and books published by the *Semerkind Yayınları* (the branch of the Semerkand Media Group that prints magazines and books), as well as the lectures given by the masters, reveals the community's somewhat hostile attitude towards modernism.⁴⁹ The students of the Menzil community, for instance, denounce

44 Öztoprak n.d., 48.

45 Öztürk 2019, 186.

46 This term means 'service' in Turkish and in this context refers to the voluntary work performed by Sufi students to benefit their spiritual masters and the brotherhood to which they belong. It can take different forms: for example, pilgrims visiting Menzil may provide their *hizmet* by working free of charge as bricklayers or kitchen helpers. See Gurdogan 2010.

47 Öztürk 2019, 186.

48 Erol 2012, 11.

49 Modernity can be defined in two ways. Firstly, it refers to a historical period which spanned from the 14th century until the dissolution of the USSR (see Berman 2012, 16–7). Secondly, it pertains to a set of cultural norms and attitudes that emerged after the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. The second definition is closely associated with the development of individualism, capitalism, urbanisation, and a positive attitude towards

individualism and capitalism because both, in their view, imply the pre-eminence of the welfare of the individual at the expense of that of the community as a whole.⁵⁰ They are also openly hostile to secularism in schools,⁵¹ the unrestricted access to technology,⁵² and entertainment sources originating from Western countries.⁵³ They also oppose the emancipation of women:⁵⁴ in one of his most famous books,⁵⁵ Sheikh Muhammad Saki Erol called for their subjugation and a quasi-segregation of them within the home.⁵⁶ The community also expresses a nationalist point of view⁵⁷ and often emphasises its support for state institutions and symbols.⁵⁸

Overall, it is possible to theorise that such conservatism regarding social and political issues may be expressed in the mass voting for conservative parties.

With regard to politics, the official position of the Menzil community is complete indifference. When asked about their views on political issues, they respond neutrally and deny any connection with any party.⁵⁹ Both Sufi students who were interviewed⁶⁰ confirm that politics is a topic of secondary importance to the members of the Menzil community, who generally have little interest in it.⁶¹

This markedly passive attitude towards politics originated when the community was still led by Sheikh Muhammed Raşid Erol, between the 1970s and the 1990s. As stated earlier, the relationship between conservative political parties and Sufi orders

technology, science, and progress. In Europe, modernity also involves the separation of state and religion (see Rosenau 1992, 5), while in the United States, religion is not rejected as a part of modernity (see Berger 2012, 313).

50 Uçak 2015, 6–8.

51 Mete 2015, 9–13.

52 Ateş 2016, 6.

53 Erikli 2015, 7.

54 Uzunay 2015, 7.

55 Erol 2018, 76.

56 This extremist attitude does not seem to apply in everyday life, since female disciples (albeit with obvious limitations due to the Islamic canon) seem to enjoy an active and emancipated life. See in this regard the unpublished dissertations by Yıldırım 2009 and Dede 2016 about women in the Menzil community.

57 Karataş 2019, 85.

58 According to Atay, the Menzil community follows this attitude as a security measure to avoid attracting the attention of the Turkish security forces (Atay 2015). It is important to note that this brotherhood is led by a family of Kurdish origin and is in south-eastern Turkey. Dede suggests that the community needed unconditional support for the state to survive the turbulent 1980s, which were characterised by the resurgence of Kurdish sectarian violence (Dede 2016, 36). This attitude is still useful for the Menzil community today, as it contributes to avoiding any possible association with the Gülen community.

59 Öztürk 2019, 45.

60 Sözer 2019, Bektaşoğlu 2021.

61 Brotherhood leaders seem to have imposed on their students a certain disinterest in political debates per se, so much so that, while not disdaining to instruct and advise devotees in any area, they refuse to give them advice on how to vote. It even seems that it is forbidden to talk about politics in the Menzil community's lodges (Karataş 2019, 85).

is something of a constant in Turkish political history. In the 1970s, for instance, an agreement between the İskenderpaşa community and Necmettin Erbakan gave birth to the first Turkish Islamist parties, the *Millî Nizam Partisi* (National Order Party) and the *Millî Selâmet Partisi* (National Salvation Party).⁶² Other Sufi communities, such as the Nur brotherhood, had their political referents.⁶³ On the other hand, in the early 1980s, the Menzil community had not yet been approached by politicians, because it was still a small religious order with a restricted number of followers, and was little known outside the neighbouring villages. With the death of Abdülhakim El Hüseyini, the rise of Muhammad Raşid Erol and the consequential increase of pilgrims and apprentices of the brotherhood, the reputation of the community began to grow. As a result, politicians began to visit the religious leader to understand how to exploit his ascendancy for their electoral purposes, although the spiritual master, officially at least, seemed quite reluctant to meet with them.⁶⁴

Ilshat Saetov⁶⁵ explains that the community began to attract the interest of the Turkish political world for the following reasons:

1. It attracts a considerable number of pilgrims and apprentices, whose attitudes and choices (including in an electoral sense) it can influence.
2. It is based in the south-east. This is an area that is still densely populated by the Kurdish minority, where politics is run through informal channels⁶⁶ and where, in general, conservative parties have always struggled to garner votes.
3. It is led by a family of Kurdish origin. This makes the sheikhs of the Menzil community authoritative referents among the various ethnic Kurdish *aşiretler* (tribes) in the area, possibly allowing a non-Kurdish political party to have a voice among them.
4. It is both an orthodox Sufi community (in that it adheres to traditional Islamic dogmas) and a conservative one, in that its spiritual leaders have always shown great deference to the Turkish nation and its institutions.⁶⁷

The parties that managed to establish a closer bond with the Menzil brotherhood belonged to the Turkish conservative spectrum. At the time, such parties had a real interest in associating with a religious authority because, at that moment, with the resumption of normal political activity after the 1980 coup d'état, Islam was used by the state as a response to the spread of left-wing ideas.⁶⁸ The nationalist parties such as the *Millîyetçi Hareket Partisi* (Nationalist Action Party – MHP), in particular, believed that they needed the support of a spiritual authority to attract supporters from the

62 Özdalga 2010, 78.

63 Arslan 2012, 156–7.

64 Şentürk 2019, 139.

65 Saetov 2018, 57–67.

66 Guida 2013, 66.

67 Bektaşoğlu 2021.

68 Şen 2010, 64.

ranks of the most devout Muslims.⁶⁹ For the nationalists, however, it was difficult to find a religious figure that shared their political vision. The only Sufi master to do so seemed to be Muhammed Raşid Erol and, as a result, many nationalist party members became frequent visitors to the village and even students in the Menzil community. Soner Yalcın⁷⁰ writes that Alparslan Türkeş himself, founder of the MHP, took lessons on Islamic matters and had deep conversations with Muhammed Raşid Erol. Kaya Ataberk⁷¹ suggests that these contacts helped to make the MHP's ideology more moderate and Islam-conscious: the party, known for its aggressive Turanism⁷² developed a more conciliatory attitude towards the Kurdish issue and introduced Islam-inspired themes into its ideology.

Among nationalist politicians who visited the village emerged Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu. In 1993, he led a pro-Islamic group within the MHP and eventually created a party on his own, the *Büyük Birlik Partisi* (Great Unity Party – BBP). His objective was to experiment with the 'Turkish-Islamic Synthesis'⁷³ at a party level. In this political adventure, Yazıcıoğlu went to Menzil and asked for the electoral support of the community. According to Tayfun Atay,⁷⁴ the brotherhood backed him, but the BBP failed to become a significant political force. Thus, despite a fairly successful local election, it appears that the brotherhood's support was not sufficient for the electoral affirmation of a political party. This lack of incisiveness within the brotherhood could be due to the fact that the Menzil brotherhood did not focus entirely on supporting the BBP, but also extended its support to other conservative parties.

In establishing which parties Menzil community voted for at the time, there is no agreement among political scientists. Nezir Akyeşileman and Arif Özcan⁷⁵ state that 'There are people from different political parties among Menzil followers. But the general tendency is that young *mürids* (Sufi students) support nationalists while old ones support pro-Islamic parties.' Saetov⁷⁶ writes that, over the years, the voting behaviour of the brotherhood has been quite diversified: while the Menzil community seems to have supported the MHP from 1973 to 1977, in the same years it also endorsed the Islamist parties led by Necmettin Erbakan. However, it seems that it was

69 Atal and Şimşek 2006.

70 Yalcın 2008.

71 Ataberk 2017, 147.

72 Turanism is a pan-nationalist cultural and political movement calling for close cooperation (or even political unification) between the peoples of Turkish, Tatar and Uralic origin and culture settled in Turkey and Central Asia (see Arnakis 1960, 19–32). With regard to MHP's support for Turanian ideas see Çınar and Arıkan 2002, 25.

73 An ideology developed by a group of nationalist intellectuals called *Aydınlar Ocağı* (Intellectual Hearts) in the 1970s. It was later adopted by the then Turkish government to contain the spread of leftist ideas in society. It argues that contemporary Turkish culture is a synthesis of pre-Islamic Turkish civilisation and Islam. See Oprea 2014, 131–9.

74 Atay 2015.

75 Akyeşilmen and Özcan 2014, 36.

76 Saetov 2018, 63.

the *Anavatan Partisi* (Motherland Party – ANAP) led by Turgut Özal that succeeded in gaining prominence among the apprentices of this community.

To confirm this information and provide hard data to support it, election statistics for the village of Menzil will be analysed. The usefulness of resorting to the community's place of origin, a rather small, enclosed and isolated village but important for the disciples as the place where its spiritual leaders still live, will be explained later in this article.

The data analysed here were obtained from a survey provided by the *Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu* (Statistical Institute of Turkey – TÜİK). The data show statistics on general election results in the village of Menzil from 1991 to 2002, as follows:

- On the occasion of the 1991 general elections, in Menzil all the votes were gathered in a single ballot box and the number of registered voters was 97, of whom 90 expressed their preference. ANAP was able to achieve a hard-fought victory, as it acquired 49 votes, while the RP stopped at 32 preferences.⁷⁷
- In the 1995 general elections, the situation was reversed. The votes were gathered again in a single ballot box, but the number of registered voters increased to 130, of whom 123 voted. The RP won, acquiring 72 votes, while ANAP managed to acquire just 34 preferences. However, the forced closure of the RP meant an end to the electoral popularity of Islamist parties in Menzil.⁷⁸
- In the 1999 general elections, all the votes in the village were still collected in a single ballot box and the number of registered voters increased again to 184, with 175 registered preferences expressed. ANAP gained 99 preferences, followed by BBP and the right-wing *Doğru Yol Partisi* (True Path Party – DYP) with 29 and 22 votes.⁷⁹
- ANAP maintained its pre-eminence in Menzil even after the advent of the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party – AKP). In the 2002 general elections, the votes were again collected in a single ballot box and the number of registered voters increased again to 196, of whom 191 voted. Although the party represented by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan acquired a landslide victory on the national level, in Menzil it was defeated by ANAP. The party represented by Mesut Yılmaz won the electoral contest with 82 votes, while the AKP acquired just 51 preferences.⁸⁰

Obviously, the possibility that the electoral preferences expressed by the village of Menzil were repeated among all the scattered disciples in Turkey is a hypothesis, as it is impossible to analyse. However, there are considerations to be made in this regard, which will be further explored in the conclusions.

Returning to the election results, an explanation for ANAP's following among the Menzil community can certainly be found in the support of the party's political ideology.

77 TÜİK 1991.

78 TÜİK 1995.

79 TÜİK 1999.

80 TÜİK 2002.

In this regard, Şemsettin Bektaşoğlu,⁸¹ one of the most important figures of the Menzil community in Istanbul, explains that, among the students of the Menzil community, two factors are considered essential when choosing a party to vote for: it must support greater public visibility of Islam and it must subsidise and protect free, private economic initiatives. Ali Sözer,⁸² editor and author at Semerkand Media Group, explains that apprentices of the Menzil brotherhood vote for conservative parties mainly because progressive parties are perceived as hostile to Islam. ANAP seemed to be able to accommodate such demands.⁸³ Its president, Turgut Özal, was a devout Muslim and favoured the rebirth of Islam's public role by fostering the emergence of a pro-Islamic press and religious schools. In addition, he supported private businesses and the opening of Turkey to international markets. Moreover, he was an ardent nationalist. ANAP was thus the party that, within the conservative spectrum, most closely responded to the instances of the Menzil brotherhood disciples.

Nationalist parties (such as the MHP) could attract the votes of the more patriotic apprentices, but eventually, the MHP began to support moderate secularism⁸⁴ and thus seemed to lose the support of the more religious students. Islamist parties (like the RP), on the other hand, were the best choice for the more devout Menzil students, but the economic reforms proposed by the parties' leader, Necmettin Erbakan,⁸⁵ did not make them a popular choice for a Sufi community that was already expanding economically. It should also be added that the community seems to have voted, many times, in such a way as to maximise the effectiveness of its vote. It can also be argued that the Menzil brotherhood's disciples voted en masse for Özal's party because it was the most popular conservative party and the one likely to have the best chance of winning the election. In this matter, the Menzil brotherhood would have acted on a simple calculation of political expediency, thus becoming a textbook case of 'tactical voting.'⁸⁶

The success of ANAP could also be ascribed to internal changes in the Menzil community. Usta⁸⁷ believes that one reason for the initial success of nationalist parties among the students of the Menzil community is related to the peculiar social composition of this group. According to him, and as mentioned earlier, most of the first-hour apprentices in the Menzil community had rural origins. Ergun Özbudun⁸⁸ believes that those who grew up in traditionalist and very devout families, in which both Islam

81 Bektaşoğlu 2021.

82 Sözer 2019.

83 Kalaycıoğlu 2002, 52.

84 Çınar and Arıkan 2002, 29.

85 Yavuz 1997, 73–4.

86 Tactical (or strategic) voting occurs when voters support a candidate or coalition not because of their sincere preferences, but to achieve the best possible outcome (or prevent an undesirable one). This is done by voting for the most popular candidates, regardless of one's sympathy or dislike for their programme. See for example Cox 1997, 340.

87 Usta 1997, 91.

88 Özbudun 2013, 3–4.

and Turkish traditionalism rhetoric have a very strong influence on their daily lives, are a kind of 'reservoir of votes' for Turkish conservative parties to draw on. However, the social base of the community diversified over time and so different viewpoints (and hence, political demands) began to appear among its apprentices. This means that the students tended to vote towards conservative parties, but they could not agree on a single one that met all of their demands. However, a party like ANAP, which could accommodate most of their demands, had the potential to become the most popular political party among the students of the Menzil brotherhood.

Usta reports that relations between Özal and Muhammed Raşid Erol were so strong that the Prime Minister even invited the sheikh to visit him in Ankara.⁸⁹ As mentioned earlier, Özal worked to free the sheikh from the exile to which he had been condemned in the Turkish capital city. ANAP deputy (and later also minister) Hasan Celal Güzel also visited him on many occasions.⁹⁰

Despite this apparent closeness between the political world and the Menzil community, this relationship at the time was rather limited in scope. The leader of the Menzil community seemed reluctant to meet personally with political leaders who visited the lodge. Çakır⁹¹ alleges that, for the Menzil community as it was in the early 1980s, deep involvement with a political party would have been difficult to initiate and manage. At that time, his brotherhood was growing, but it was still far from reaching its current number of followers. Moreover, it lacked the network of foundations and activities that characterise it today. Therefore, it was unable to exert any influence beyond the boundaries of the village of Menzil and the few neighbouring settlements. It could be argued that Sheikh Muhammed Raşid Erol was not interested in politics, because he believed that becoming a powerful social actor was beyond the capabilities and resources of the brotherhood.

On the other hand, it could be argued that the Menzil community of the time was an interesting referent for conservative parties, but the case of the BBP showed that it was unable to mobilise a large number of votes in favour of any party, and its importance was limited.

It can therefore be concluded that Muhammad Raşid Erol was approached mainly because the conservative parties would have found it useful to have a referent in the south-east and among the local Kurds.

Concluding this section, when the Menzil community was led by Muhammad Raşid Erol, it had rather limited relations with the Turkish political world. It often confined itself to voting en masse for many conservative parties, eventually settling on neoliberal positions by voting for Özal's ANAP.

89 Usta 1997, 117.

90 Çakır 2014, 74

91 *ibid.*

5. The Menzil Brotherhood and the AKP

As mentioned earlier, the advent of Abdülbaki Erol as the brotherhood's leader brought about a change of direction in the Menzil community. Under the new sheikh's guidance, the brotherhood expanded its affairs and even began to expose itself more to politics, especially with regard to the AKP. In addition to the mere electoral data, which will be provided below, various other factors indicate that this political party has acquired a broad electoral consensus among the community over time.

Mr Sözer has confirmed that the AKP is very popular among the Menzil students, even though it competes for community votes with other conservative forces.⁹² Despite this downplaying of the AKP's popularity among Menzil apprentices, the relationship between the party and the brotherhood seems much deeper. On many different occasions, the leaders of the two groups have met in public or used both media and social networks to express their closeness.

The former AKP member and former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu met several times with Sheikh Abdülbaki Erol, both when the latter went to Istanbul on business and during his official visits to south-eastern Turkey.⁹³ The Menzil community has also repeatedly used its media to express its support for the AKP (or its leader Erdoğan) in their most difficult moments or on the eve of elections,⁹⁴ In addition are the explicit words of esteem expressed towards Erdoğan by Sheikh Muhammad Saki Erol himself.⁹⁵

Beyond visits and public expressions of esteem, an analysis of election statistics in Menzil in the post-2000 period shows that, since its inception, the AKP has proved to be the most popular party in Menzil in general elections. Again, the data examined are provided by the TÜİK:

- In 2007, the votes were collected in a single ballot box. The registered voters numbered 379, of whom 376 voted. The AKP received 353 preferences, while among its competitors just MHP, *Demokrat Parti* (Democratic Party) and *Saadet Partisi* (Felicity Party) managed to acquire some votes, each with less than 10 preferences.⁹⁶
- In 2011, the votes were gathered in two ballot boxes of 239 units each. The number of actual votes was 462 and the outcome again showed a landslide victory for the AKP, which received 448 votes. The second most voted parties were the *Halkın Sesi Partisi* (The People's Voice Party) and the MHP, both with 5 preferences⁹⁷.

Furthermore, since 2015, the AKP's political competitors have not managed to acquire a single vote in the village:

92 Sözer 2019.

93 Şentürk 2019, 139.

94 *ibid.*

95 Öztürk 2019, 139.

96 TÜİK 2007.

97 TÜİK 2011. Here the village of Menzil is indicated by its old name Durak.

- In the general elections in June 2015, the votes were collected in two ballot boxes of 376 units each. The number of valid votes was 730, all received by AKP. The same pattern can be seen in the same year's snap elections. The votes were collected again in two ballot boxes of 285 units each. There were 561 valid votes, with the AKP again receiving the totality of preferences.⁹⁸
- 2018 saw another AKP's landslide victory. The votes were collected in three ballot boxes, two of 381 and one of 382 units. The number of valid votes was 1092 and, again, Erdoğan's party acquired the totality of the preferences.⁹⁹

Concerning the data for the 2023 general election, statistics provided by the *Yüksek Seçim Kurulu* (Supreme Election Council – YSK) were used, as at the time of writing, the TÜİK had not yet made such data available. In any case, in the last election in Menzil, votes were collected in five different ballot boxes, the capacity of which has not been disclosed by the YSK. Despite this, the AKP proved to be the dominant force within the village, accumulating an impressive 1717 votes compared to the *Yeniden Refah Partisi's* (Renewed Welfare Party) 35 preferences and the MHP's 9. No other party received a single vote.¹⁰⁰

The popularity of the AKP in Menzil can also be observed in the presidential elections. According to the TÜİK statistics, in Menzil the support for the AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has always been undisputed:

- In the first presidential elections in 2014, the votes were collected in two ballot boxes, one of 331 units and one of 330. The registered preferences expressed were 639. The Menzil village voted in its entirety for Erdoğan. His competitors received no vote at all.¹⁰¹
- In 2018, the electoral preferences were collected in three ballot boxes, two composed of 381 units and one of 382. The number of valid votes was 1092. Again, Erdoğan acquired the totality of preferences.¹⁰²

In the second round of the presidential elections – the decisive one – on 14 May 2023, Erdoğan again dominated the votes within the village. As many as 2053 votes were cast in favour of the outgoing President of the Republic, while his rival, Kemal Kiliçdaroğlu, only managed to collect 2 votes in his favour. Again, these data come from the YSK, which does not disclose how the number units comprising each ballot box.¹⁰³

The village provides the same, undisputed support for the AKP also in the local elections:

- In 2009, the votes were gathered in two ballot boxes of 204 and 203 units, respectively. The number of valid votes was 401. The AKP obtained a landslide victory with

98 TÜİK 2015.

99 TÜİK 2018a.

100 YSK 2023a.

101 TÜİK 2014a.

102 TÜİK 2018b.

103 YSK 2023b.

383 preferences. Among its competitors, SP and BBP managed to acquire some votes, with 11 and 5 preferences each, respectively.¹⁰⁴

- In the 2014 local elections, the electoral preferences were collected in two ballot boxes of 323 and 325 units, respectively. The number of actual votes was 625 and the AKP received 618 votes. The second most successful party, the BBP, received just 5 preferences.¹⁰⁵
- In the 2019 local elections, the votes were collected in four ballot boxes. Two were composed of 284 units, while the other two comprised 285 each. The valid votes were 1,045, of which the AKP received 1,036. The second most successful party was the MHP, which received 7 votes.¹⁰⁶

The mass vote of the village of Menzil for the AKP continued the trend that led to ANAP becoming the most popular party among the Menzil community.

The success of Erdoğan's party was accompanied by a further evolution of the social composition of this brotherhood. Since the 1980s, as mentioned earlier, the social base of the community has expanded and it eventually came to include artisans and owners of small businesses. Members of the Menzil brotherhood thus began to support parties that placed private enterprise and the creation of a welfare state at the centre of their programmes. This is why political parties that made economic liberalism their banner (such as ANAP and later AKP) were able to secure the demands of this part of the electorate. The success among Menzil students of the party led by Erdoğan is also due to tactical considerations that are linked to the dominant position it has acquired among conservative voters over the years. This is similar to ANAP's achievements in the past. The AKP's absolute pre-eminence within the conservative front has made it practically useless to vote for any other party besides the one led by Erdoğan.

This significant electoral support for the AKP from Menzil community disciples has led to many accusations over the years about the existence of an unclear relationship between them. Popular rumours believe that, after the failed coup of 15 July 2016, the Menzil community is the group that assumed the place once occupied by Gülen and his disciples, namely, the group that mobilises its students and those who use its aid structures to further the political success of the AKP,¹⁰⁷ in return for which they receive subsidies and facilities of various kinds.¹⁰⁸

It should be remembered that similar dynamics have long characterised Turkish politics. Many political parties have had informal relations with a Sufi brotherhood to exploit its influence and networks for electoral purposes.¹⁰⁹ Such methods had already been tried at the time of the DP of Menderes and the Nur brotherhood or the İskender-

104 TÜİK 2009. Here again, Menzil is indicated as Durak.

105 TÜİK 2014b.

106 TÜİK 2019.

107 Zelyut 2019, 75.

108 Poyraz 2017, 56.

109 Tuğal 2006, 263.

derpaşa community and the various Islamist parties led by Erbakan.¹¹⁰ As in the case of the Gülen group, however, relations between the Menzil brotherhood and the AKP are much deeper than those previously built by politicians and sheikhs.

Ergün Poyraz argues that the AKP filled the state bureaucracy and institutions with disciples of the brotherhood to secure its loyalty.¹¹¹ According to Kaya Ataberk, the Menzil community has acquired a very strong presence in the Ministry of Health.¹¹² Barış Pehlivan and Barış Terkoğlu have thus speculated that the Menzil brotherhood created a ‘parallel state’ within all state organs, including the police corps.¹¹³ Rıza Zelyut reports that these accusations are also shared by some parliamentarians from parties opposed to the AKP.¹¹⁴

While it must be specified that most of these accusations cannot be proven with absolute certainty, and that they come largely from authors and journalists hostile to AKP, it must be admitted that some allegations are more specific and can be proven. The case of Recep Akdağ – a disciple of the Menzil community and Minister of Health in the first government led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – proves that there may be some truth in the accusations of cronyism levelled at the AKP and the Menzil community. Journalist Saygı Öztürk describes that, during Akdağ’s tenure as the Minister of Health, he used his power to dismiss old staff and hire students from the Menzil brotherhood, often without any open competition or the necessary qualifications.¹¹⁵ Moreover, under the leadership of Akdağ, the Ministry of Health allegedly utilised facilities belonging to the Menzil community, such as the *Emsey Hastanesi* in Istanbul, to offer treatment for substance abuse issues such as smoking, alcoholism and drug addiction.¹¹⁶ This resulted in the Menzil brotherhood allegedly gaining a significant amount of money and influence within the Ministry. The Menzil community has of course repeatedly rejected these accusations and makes every effort to distinguish itself from the Gülen group.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, the general public continues to view it with suspicion and nickname it ‘METÖ.’¹¹⁸

In conclusion, the support that the Menzil community gives to the AKP seems to be much stronger than the support it has given to other political forces in the past. While this is because Erdoğan’s party has been able to attract the general support of Turkish Muslims, it can be argued that there are more specific reasons.

110 Yaşar 2018, 323.

111 Poyraz 2017, 56.

112 Ataberk 2017, 149–50.

113 *ibid.*; Pehlivan and Terkoğlu 2019, 23.

114 Zelyut 2019, 75.

115 Öztürk 2019, 189.

116 *ibid.*

117 Sözer 2019b, 6.

118 The Gülen community is referred to by the acronym FETÖ (*‘Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü’* – Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation) by Turkish security forces. The acronym METÖ thus stands for *‘Menzilci Terör Örgütü’* (Menzil Terrorist Organisation).

As theorised earlier in this article, it can be argued that the AKP managed to secure the support of the Menzil community by reinforcing those conditions previously created by ANAP and which facilitated the brotherhood's expansion outside the religious sphere. In addition to supporting private economic initiatives and removing barriers to the employment of Muslims in state bodies, the AKP resorted to the patronage practices mentioned earlier. It is also noteworthy that since 2007, Erdoğan has managed to consolidate all political power in his own hands, even by repressing his opponents with a certain harshness.¹¹⁹ In this context, any figure who enjoys – or has enjoyed – a certain social authority or notoriety has often been perceived by the AKP leader as a possible competitor in the electoral field or as a future challenger to rise to the role of the most popular figure in Turkish society. Therefore, any potential alternative power centre, including Sufi orders and communities, had to become loyal to Erdoğan himself or face the threat of being marginalised and potentially repressed. Arguably, the Menzil brotherhood made the first choice.

6. Conclusion

What emerges from this analysis is that Menzil is a Sufi community that makes its humble and informal identity and its caring activities its banner. In this way, it differs from other brotherhoods that are more closed and selective in the choice of their members (such as the İsmailağa community),¹²⁰ and, while obviously indulging in caring activities, its focus is mainly on religious instruction (such as the Süleymanlılar).¹²¹

It has been described how, over time, the Menzil community has seen its membership grow and how its social base has evolved. If one adds to this its creation of a network of businesses and associations, it must therefore be inferred that it has managed to become an important economic and social player. Indeed, as it has developed, its importance in the eyes of Turkish politics has increased in parallel. Over time, the Menzil community has thus established fruitful relations with the most successful conservative parties, such as ANAP initially and currently AKP.

However, given that the only available data to sustain such a hypothesis are confined to the village of Menzil, the question remains whether the electoral patterns highlighted by TÜİK and YSK may have been repeated in the rest of Turkey, and how.

In this regard, in addition to the 'tactical voting' theory alluded to earlier, the hypothesis that trust influences political mobilisation and voting mechanics within a small group must be taken into account.

With regard to trust, it should be considered that, according to Avital Livny,¹²² members of a religious group, particularly one as narrow as a Sufi brotherhood, tend to trust their fellow members, regardless of whether they have never met them in

119 Sæetov 2018, 63.

120 Pirický 2012, 40.

121 Saymaz 2016.

122 Livny 2016, 42.

person. Marilyn Brewer and Roderick Kramer¹²³ explain that members of a circumscribed group tend to standardise their behaviour and choices, even in the electoral field. It can thus be assumed that members of a group will end up voting in the same way, because they share the motivations behind their choice, whether dictated by sincere preferences or tactical considerations.¹²⁴ In this, they have reasonable confidence that the other members of the group will behave in the same way.

Members of the Menzil community correspond exactly to the group in question. However numerous, they are still both a religious and numerical minority within Turkish society. Even with their differences in social and economic status, they share a similar social stratum and mentality that is reflected in their religious devotion. They also share very high levels of trust in other disciples in the community.¹²⁵ This is why it is reasonable to assume that, wherever they are and even given all the variables that may influence voting, they will all end up voting for the same party.

The village of Menzil is an important place to study the voting behaviour of the whole brotherhood, because it is the only location in which students can be 'isolated' from any factor that may influence their preferences. In Menzil, there are no social or economic factors that could affect voting preferences, except for the internal dynamics of the Sufi brotherhood itself.

Therefore, it can be concluded that a large proportion of the disciples of the brotherhood, even if scattered across the whole of Turkey, likely did vote for the ANAP party first and the AKP later.

This conclusion is based on the hypothesis that their shared genuine preferences, shared tactical considerations, and intra-group mechanics reproduce what can be observed in the brotherhood's place of origin, the village of Menzil.

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123 Brewer and Kramer 1986, 547.

124 Bilecen 2015, 23.

125 Yıldırım 2009, 35.

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