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# Two Politicians and a Shrine: Competing Personal Brands around Eyüpsultan in Istanbul

Shortly before Istanbul's mayoral elections in March 2019, Ekrem İmamoğlu, the candidate of the oppositional secularist Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), publicly recited the Quranic Yâsîn Surah in Istanbul's Eyüpsultan Mosque, which many regard as the most sacred Islamic place in Turkey. The media have routinely covered the frequent prayers there by Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), but İmamoğlu's visit sparked controversies across the political factions. On Twitter, journalist Orhan Gökdemir declared the death of secularism,<sup>1</sup> while others accused the CHP candidate of pre-election hypocrisy.<sup>2</sup>

## 1 Branding Politicians with Shrines

In the following, I discuss how rival politicians in Turkey have branded themselves by visiting Eyüpsultan within the recent context of the increasingly tense polarisation between so-called Islamic-religious and secular groups. The AKP, having ruled with its predecessors locally since 1994 and nationally since 2002, claims to represent society's religious segments, while the CHP portrays itself as promoting secular, republican values. I also investigate how these branding activities may transform Eyüpsultan's dominant Islamist image. In doing so, I analyse the interplay between personal branding and place branding. The research focuses on both traditional and social media as the main arenas in which the visits are communicated to and commented on by the public.

Iulia Medveschi and Sandu Frunză have discussed the ways in which politicians are frequently branded with an "aura of sacredness,"<sup>3</sup> at times even in a messianic manner, that mobilises transcendent motifs.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Erdoğan is venerated by his supporters as taking a stand against the secularist policies of the

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<sup>1</sup> See Gökdemir, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> See halkweb.com.tr, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Medveschi and Frunză, 2018: 148.

<sup>4</sup> See Medveschi and Frunză, 2018: 141–144.

elite, while İmamoğlu is seen – even by people outside the CHP’s core supporters – as a potential saviour from what they perceive as the AKP’s increasingly authoritarian rule.<sup>5</sup> Targeting pious Sunni groups in particular, both politicians use religious elements such as visits to shrines in order to brand themselves. The ways in which they do this differ, however, based on their personal and party backgrounds. For example, by combining their Eyüpsultan visits with visits to other shrines, they are able to symbolise their competing identity narratives.

## 2 Eyüpsultan as a Symbol of Islamic-Ottoman Rule

The Eyüpsultan Shrine is a central feature in Turkey’s religious topography. With the adjacent mosque and the surrounding Eyüpsultan neighbourhood, it has for centuries been a popular pilgrimage site (cf. Fig. 1) and a symbol of Sunni Islam’s connection to political rule. It is named after a companion of the Prophet Muhammad whose grave, legend has it, was rediscovered during the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul in 1453. Ottoman sultans later connected their power to the saint by visiting the shrine during enthronement ceremonies and before military campaigns.

Recently, the AKP has branded Eyüpsultan as a symbolic place in its revivalist Ottoman and Islamist rhetoric.<sup>6</sup> Erdoğan has held numerous public meetings and prayed there at events crucial to his career. After winning the constitutional referendum in 2017, which was intended to augment his power in a new presidential system, he performed a prayer of gratitude in the Eyüpsultan Mosque. Journalist Erk Acarer interpreted this as Erdoğan imitating Ottoman enthronement ceremonies for his legitimisation rather than responding to the protests about the referendum’s rightfulness.<sup>7</sup> Erdoğan’s subsequent prayer at the shrine of Mehmed II, the sultan who had led the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul, was a further reference to Ottoman state rituals.

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<sup>5</sup> See Gottschlich, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> For more details, see Roelcke, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> See Acarer, 2017.



**Fig. 1:** Eyüpsultan Shrine  
Photo: Annegret Roelcke, 2016.

### 3 Using a Sacred Place to Brand the Secularist Party Candidate

Since many who consider themselves secular have viewed Erdoğan's public prayers as aggressive demonstrations of the Islamisation of politics, they have also felt uneasy about the prayers of the secularist party candidate in Eyüpsultan. However, İmamoğlu's pious behaviour has posed a serious threat to the AKP's image as the main protector of Islam. By using his conservative Sunni origins and childhood in a rural Black Sea area to brand himself, İmamoğlu presents a social background shared by many AKP supporters, in contrast to other CHP politicians who are viewed as secular urban elites. His image as a pious Muslim promoting secular values has been central to his reconciliatory discourse. When İmamoğlu won the elec-

tion, it was seen by many as a victory beyond Istanbul and especially against Erdoğan, due to the city's economic, cultural, and symbolic significance. Under the pressure of the AKP, the election was repeated, which only made İmamoğlu's victory even clearer.<sup>8</sup>

In 2021, after two years in office and polls indicating İmamoğlu's popularity vis-à-vis Erdoğan and thus suggesting his future as the country's president, the AKP is increasingly viewing him as a threat.<sup>9</sup> AKP-ruled institutions' interference with İmamoğlu's visits to shrines only confirm their importance in the success of his personal branding. In 2019, he was denied access to pray at Eyüpsultan Shrine.<sup>10</sup> While this was possibly aimed at preventing pictures of him from being taken at the symbolic Islamic site, media coverage instead portrayed him as having been wronged by the AKP, which only increased his popularity.<sup>11</sup> In 2021, the Interior Ministry sued İmamoğlu for disrespectful behaviour simply because he had walked with his hands folded behind his back in the courtyard of the shrine of Mehmed II.<sup>12</sup>

## 4 Eyüpsultan as a Symbol of Islamic Diversity

Apart from his own personal branding, visits to Eyüpsultan have also helped İmamoğlu identify the place with narratives that differ from the dominant revivalist Ottoman and Islamist ones promoted by the AKP. Thus, on 19 May 2020, he observed both secular-republican and Islamic holidays there. In addition to Eyüpsultan Shrine, he also visited the nearby shrines of Ümmi Sinan and Karyağdı Baba. The first represents a narrative celebrating early republican politics involving a member of the convent connected to the shrine. While the CHP cherishes the early republican era of the 1920s for its modernising and secularising reforms, revivalist narratives portray it negatively for having broken with Ottoman traditions. The second shrine belongs to the Bektāşi order, whose heritage is nowadays claimed by Alevis. This heterogenous, religious-ethnic community has been often discri-

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<sup>8</sup> See Gottschlich, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> See Gottschlich, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> İmamoğlu refrained from naming the individual who denied him access. The Istanbul Directorate for Shrines and Museums, which belongs to the AKP-ruled Ministry of Culture and Tourism, is officially responsible for the administration of Eyüpsultan Shrine.

<sup>11</sup> See iyigunler.net, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> See Gottschlich, 2021.

minated against in Turkey's Sunni-majority society. Many of them support the CHP.<sup>13</sup>

The two politicians' visits to Eyüpsultan clearly illustrate the reciprocal relationship between personal branding and place branding. Both use the place as a symbol of Islam in society, but by incorporating it into their individual brand images, they frame it – and therefore Islam – with different identity narratives. Erdoğan legitimates his power by claiming to revive an Islamic-Ottoman heritage and, more implicitly, as Islamically sanctioned by the saint. As a politician of the secularist CHP, İmamoğlu aims to prove his Muslim integrity in order to attract religious voters as well. His visits are central to his rhetoric of reconciling society, especially his secularist party with pious groups. By highlighting the presence of groups not commonly associated with Eyüpsultan, he constructs it as a place of diversity, thereby symbolising his respect for the various members of society. Since only those familiar with religious places in Eyüpsultan can understand the symbolism of the different shrines, the second message targets mainly religious segments. However, the diversity within İmamoğlu's image of Eyüpsultan remains within an Islamically influenced framework, and the centrality of Islam in Eyüpsultan's image is crucial for the construction of İmamoğlu's own image.

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13 See Dreßler, 2013: 16–30.

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