



© International Journal of
Human Sciences

ISSN: 1303-5134
www.insanbilimleri.com/en

Volume: 2 Issue: 2 Year: 2005
Published: July 26, 2005

ELITE THEORY APPLIED TO CONTEMPORARY TURKISH SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyse, the general power structure of Turkish society. On a general basis “Elite Theory” was used in this study to understand, to examine and to explain the power structure of Turkish society. Elite theory highlights power, control and influence for examining it’s subject and there are various elite theories within this context, such as elitist elite theory, pluralist elite theory, democratic elite theory, demo-elite perspective and the corporatist perspective. Specifically, this paper examined Turkish elites using democratic elite theory, but emphasised “the demo-elite perspective” within democratic elite theory. However, to some degree, it profited from other elite theories, such as the pluralist perspective and the corporatist perspective.

In accordance with the pluralists views one could argue that, power has been diffused and fragmented among many people or elite groups which together participate in the decision-making process in contemporary Turkish society. Nevertheless, decisive and effective power (parallel with

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the main thesis of the elitist view) has been concentrated and centralised in the hands of the small number of elite groups which are the most powerful in the national power structure.

Key Words:

Power, Elite, Elite Theory, Democratic Elite Theory, The Elite Recruitment Process, The Turkish Political Elites, The Turkish Key Elites, Relative Elite Autonomy.

ÖZET:

“Elit Teorisi Temelinde Günümüz Türk Toplumunun İncelenmesi”

Çalışmanın temel amacı, günümüz Türk toplumunun iktidar yapısını (Arslan, 2004-a; 2004-b; 2004-c) anlayıp, güç ilişkilerini analiz etmektir. Bunun yanı sıra, günümüz Türk toplumunda elit dolaşım süreci ve bu süreci etkileyen faktörleri ortaya koymak da çalışmanın temel amaçlarındandır. Çalışmanın teorik temelini elit teorisi, özellikle de onun temel açılımları olan demokratik elit teorisi ve demo elti perspektif oluşturdu. Temel veri kaynağı olarak, Arslan tarafından 1994-2001 yılları arasında, elit sosyolojisinin yöntemleri (Hertz, 1995; Moyser & Wagstaffe 1987) kullanılarak gerçekleştirilen 3 ayrı saha araştırmasından elde edilen bulgulardan yararlanıldı.

Bulgular da göstermektedir ki, plüralist elit teorisyenlerinin tezleriyle paralel olarak çağdaş Türk toplumunda toplumsal ve siyasi güç, birçok elit grubu arasında dağılmış durumdadır. Bununla birlikte bu elit gruplarının iktidar pastasından aldığı payların eşit olduğu söylenemez. Öte yandan, Türkiye’de elit dolaşımı sürecinde önemli rol oynayan faktörlerin başında eğitim gelmektedir. Eğitim faktörü yalnızca niceliksel açıdan değil, niteliksel bakımdan da büyük önem taşımaktadır (Arslan, 2004-d). Yani alınan eğitim miktarının (eğitim düzeyinin) yanı sıra kalitesi de bu süreç de etkilidir. Bunların yanı sıra, alınan eğitimin türü de bireylerin toplum içinde etkin konumlara ulaşabilmelerinde etkili olabilmektedir.

Türkiye’de bireylerin, toplumsal yapı içinde etkin ve saygın bir konum elde edebilmelerinde önemli rol oynayan bir başka etken de ailesel öz geçmiştir (Arslan, 2004-e). Ayrıcalıklı aile bağları ve akrabalık ilişkileri, Türk toplumunun elit dolaşımı süreci üzerinde hem doğrudan, hem de dolaylı etkilere sahiptir.

Anahtar Sözcükler:

İktidar, Elit, Elit Teorisi, Demokratik Elit Teorisi, Elitlerin Dolaşımı, Türk Siyasi Elitleri, Türk Anahtar Elitleri, Elit Bağımsızlığı.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term elite (Jary & Jary, 1991: 188) is of French derivation. It originally derived from the Latin “eligre” which means select and shares a common root with “electa” that means selected (Arslan, 1995: 3). Theoretically, elites can be defined as those people who hold institutionalised power, control the social resources (include not only the wealth, prestige and status but also the personal resources of charisma, time, motivation and energy) and have a serious influence (either actively or potentially) on the decision-making process. They can realise their own will in spite of opposition (Arslan, 1999-b: 79)..

Inequalities in the distribution of power, wealth and prestige are common features of contemporary societies. To Mosca, although absolute political equality, majority government and free elections are a “myth” they are essential elements of an open ruling class (Arslan, 2004-f). Researchers of elites aim to understand and explain the existence and persistence of inequalities in the distribution of power and the relationship between power and control in contemporary societies.

Elite theory research is based on power and influence. It is concerned almost exclusively with inequalities based on power or lack thereof. This distinguishes it from class theory. Power in turn, is based on other resources (such as economic assets and organisational strength) and for its part may give rise to control over other resources as well. Etzioni (1993: 19) stressed that elite theory is concerned primarily with the other resources which are related to it.

According to elite theory, societies are divided into the “few” who hold power and rule and the “many” who are ruled (Bottomore, 1993; 1991). The ruling group called an elite, effectively monopolises power and makes the important decisions. The others (non-elites), the public or the masses have relatively no power and no choice but to accept the decision of the minorities.

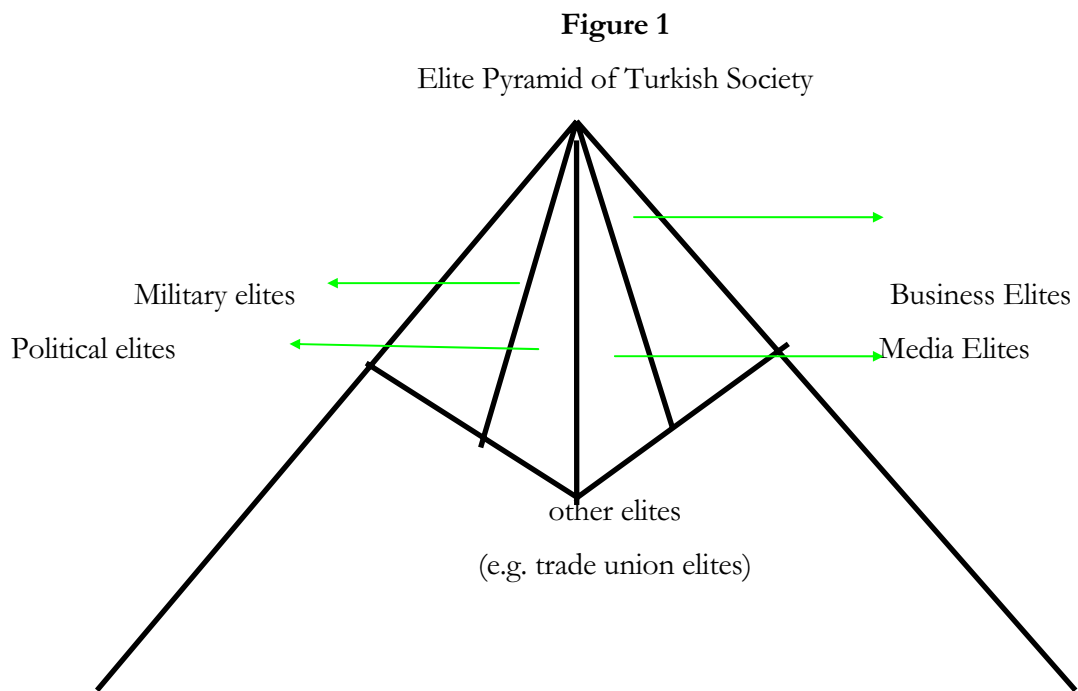
On a general basis “Elite Theory” (Etzioni, 1993) was used in this study to understand, to examine and to explain the power structure of Turkish society. Elite theory highlights power, control and influence for examining it’s subject. There are various elite theories within this context, such as elitist elite theory, pluralist elite theory, democratic elite theory, demo-elite perspective and the corporatist perspective. Specifically, this paper examined Turkish elites using democratic elite theory, but emphasised “the demo-elite perspective” within democratic elite theory. However, to

some degree, it profited from other elite theories, such as the pluralist perspective and the corporatist perspective.

2. KEY ELITES IN CONTEMPORARY TURKISH SOCIETY

Following the argument of pluralist elite theorists, power has been diffused amongst several elite groups in Turkey. Nevertheless, these elite groups do not have an equal share of the power cake. In contrast to the pluralists' view, some elite groups are significantly more powerful and have a greater influence on the decision making process in contemporary Turkish society. These groups can be identified as the “key elites”.

As shown in **Figure 1**, there are four key elite groups in contemporary Turkey which are the business (Arslan, 2004-g), military (Arslan, 2004-h; 2004-i; 2004-j), political (Arslan, 2004-k; 2004-l) and media elites (Arslan, 2004-m). Turkish “key elites” have important similarities with C. W. Mills' (1956) American findings. They have social inter-connections, similar interests and familiar social backgrounds. The major socio-economic and political decisions are shaped directly or indirectly by the key elite groups in Turkey. However, their unity is not exact and unchangeable. The unity amongst Turkish key elite groups is relative and it may differ in terms of time and conditions.



The key elites are more powerful, because they control major social resources: whilst political elites control the state machinery, business elites monopolise economic and financial resources, military elites control the main physical resources, such as weapons and the armed forces, and media elites have control of the audio, audio-visual and written aspects of the media.

3. SEPARATION OF POWERS, RELATIVE ELITE AUTONOMY AND RELATIVE EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY IN TURKEY

The formal Turkish political system has a liberal democratic character: power is separated and legislative, executive and judicial power is held by different elite groups. These groups counterbalance the power of each other. Turkish democracy is an electoral representative democracy that characterised by free elections, freedom of speech, press and association.

The Turkish elites are relatively autonomous from one another and especially from the governing elites. Moreover, there is relative equality of opportunity to obtain a position of power in Turkish society. However, as with most western societies, it is impossible to talk of absolute autonomy and complete equality of power in Turkey. These suppositions of democratic elite theory are mostly idealistic and they can not be observed in any country in either east or west. Therefore, the term “relative autonomy” is preferred to the more idealistic “absolute autonomy” concept in this thesis.

However the degree of relative autonomy of elites is inconstant and incomplete. It differs according to time and conditions. Some elite groups are more autonomous than others. Various factors affect the degree of elite autonomy: the type of political system, the kind of economic system, the bureaucratic structure of society and the level of development. Business elites, military elites and political elites in particular have greater autonomy in comparison with other elites, such as bureaucratic elite groups, judicial elites and scientific elites.

Nevertheless, it can be predicted that scientific (academic) elites will gain a more autonomous position within the Turkish power structure. The situation will change parallel to the socio-economic and political development of Turkish society. When Turkey completes its industrialisation and transformation from industrial society to post-industrial scientific elites will become more powerful and more prestigious in society. In accordance with Mosca’s (1939) ideas, as in most of other societies, “knowledge” will become another important social source of power

which counterbalances the power of property. Personal achievement will become as worthy as birth and wealth.

As Bell (1973) argued capital was the major resource and the capitalist was dominant in an industrial society. However he predicted, skills and knowledge would become the central resource and scientific elites would gain more autonomy and occupy dominant positions within post-industrial society.

On the other hand, it can be hypothesised that people have equal opportunities to gain a position of power in Turkish society, but again, the reality is not very different from that in any other democratic society. Only the relative equality of opportunity can be discussed, because, power has been pawned by formal or informal socio-political and economic agents in all societies. Only a small minority can overcome these barriers, and only this privileged minority have equal opportunities to obtain power.

4. ELITE UNITY AND DECENTRALISATION OF POWER IN CONTEMPORARY TURKISH SOCIETY

Counter-balancing power is very important for democratic regimes including the Turkish political system. Power must be countervailed by alternative bases of power, because uncontrolled or over-centralised power encourages the rise of authoritarian and oppressive regimes. It may cause political corruption or electoral dictatorship. On the other hand, over diffused power structures also carry serious dangers for democratic life because, it is impossible to talk about elite unity if power has been over-decentralised. Another important condition for elite unity is relative elite autonomy.

Sometimes, elite unity has great importance in order to solve serious social and economic problems and to achieve urgent socio-political goals. Recent events in Turkey provide a good example of this: the Turkish general election of 1995 held a very important place within Turkish political history. Political power was over-diffused amongst several political parties in this election. Five major political parties gained more than 10 % of the popular vote and passed the “general vote impediment”. The Islamist Welfare Party-Refah Partisi (WP-RP) (with about 20 % of the general vote) whose “ultimate aim” is to replace democracy with a totalitarian theocratic regime based on Sheriat (the Holy Islamic Rule) was one of the five parties.

Fundamentalist Islamists used highly systematic and Machiavellian tactics and gained government power. Following this success, they concentrated their pressure on the opposition and other elite groups to defeat the autonomy of the other elites and centralised power in their own hands. At the same time they began to implement their “ultimate aim”. However they could not annihilate the autonomy of elites and become all-powerful because, large majority of the Turkish population were/are against the Sheriat.

A democratic and peaceful civil movement which had no parallel in Turkish history began against the activities of the government. There was a widespread participation in this civil movement from all sections of Turkish society including elites, sub-elites and the general public. All the democratic contemporary action groups, labour union elites, business and business union elites, media elites, scientific elites, opposition political elites, military elites and others united and co-operated to save the democratic laic system in Turkey. And finally, the National Security Council-Milli Guvenlik Konseyi (MGK) issued a proclamation which invited the government to halt anti-laic and anti-democratic activities, and to follow the constitution and laws of the country.

This example demonstrates that not only the separation of powers within the state but also the separation of powers outside the state have value for the health and wealth of democracy. As Schumpeter (1992) stressed, electors cannot control the power of elected politicians. Elected politicians can only be controlled by powerful and autonomous elites.

This example also highlights the fact that the balance of elite unity is very important for democracy. As Aron emphasised, elite unity means freedom, on the other hand the complete disintegration of elites means the end of the state. Elite unity and relative elite autonomy do not contradict one another. Only independent groups can realise consensus, co-operation and unity as regards common values, beliefs and objectives. We agree with Etzioni (1993: 110) that “without elite co-operation, there can be no democracy, but without elite autonomy there can be no democracy either”.

5. THE BALANCE OF POWER: THE STRUGGLE FOR POWER IN TURKEY

The decision making process in Turkish social and political life can be analysed by using the framework of “democratic elite theory”. The key economic, social and political decisions are taken

by tiny minorities who are usually called elites. The great majority of the population are invariably politically disorganised, fragmented and inactive. However, the majority are not totally helpless and voiceless. They can play an important role in the system, by putting pressure upon political elites, and attempting to rise to an elite position themselves. Nevertheless, in reality they cannot or do not use this potential.

The recent attack of the “Refah-yol” coalition government of the WP-Islamist Welfare Party (RP-Refah Partisi) and TPP-True Path Party (DYP-Dogru Yol Partisi) on the other elite groups can be viewed as a “struggle for power”. The two partners in the recent Turkish government have begun a systematic attack through the main Turkish elite groups. This was the first major step in their ultimate aim to generate a “super-governmental elite” that was a unique controller of social resources and the decision-making process. They planned to keep the other elites and the opposition under control and pressure.

The Islamist wing (RP-proislamic party) of the government began to intensify their pressure on the military elites, business elites, academic (scientific) elites, judicial elites and the democratic segment of the media elite, because they viewed these elite groups as guardians of democracy and the prime barriers to their ultimate objective which was the Islamist revolution. The conservative partner in the government the True Path Party (DYP-TPP) concentrated its pressure especially on the trade union elites, media elites and surprisingly on the business elites.

The struggle between the TPP and business elites is very unusual and unexpected, because the Turkish business world has traditionally been the major supporter of the True Path Party and its liberal policies for decades. They have worked within co-operation and solidarity for more than forty years. Despite all these historical ties, the leader of that party is identifying the business elites as the “leech and blood sucker”. It seems that True Path Party is losing its traditional liberal mission and their ways are going to separate.

These systematic but undemocratic attacks on the opposition and other elite groups had continued during 1996. The situation has very serious dangers for democracy in Turkey, because the autonomy of the elites is usually mentioned not only as an important aspect of democracy, but also the defending the other components of democracy. It appears that, this is the first stage in their

plan to destroy democracy and the democratic regime and to generate a totalitarian theocratic state based on Sheriat (the Islamic rules).

6. ELITE RECRUITMENT PATTERNS IN TURKEY

Various social, psychological, biological and inherited factors, such as social class, social network ties, sex, age, personality, education, ...etc., may have an influence on the elite recruitment process. Nevertheless, social origin (family background) and educational background are usually counted among the most common and most influential factors. Privileged family background is highly influential in accessing to elite positions and it provides people with good connections, money, self assurance, ...etc. Social origin may influence both education and elite status. Educational level and social background of father is highly inter-correlated with the respondent's. Social background may influence access to elite positions directly and indirectly. Indirectly, father's social-economical status may have effects on the opportunity to obtain higher education.

Although kinship has some degree of importance in elite recruitment process, as stressed by Putnam (1976: 172), significance of kinship steadily declined in Turkey, like in the Netherlands, the United States of America, Sri Lanka and Japan, and achievement has become the most important factors in the system of elite recruitment in contemporary Turkey.

All the elite respondents were asked the question of "*which variables had been most effective for your actual social and occupational position?*". If the figures in **Table 1** are analysed it can be seen that education is the most effective factor in the elite recruitment process in Turkey. Both the quantity and quality of education are substantially effective on the circulation of elites. Also, the type of education and the type of school attended have indirect effects on this process. As has been discussed earlier, an important number of members of the Turkish elite have graduated from mostly prestigious universities, such as Ankara University (SBF-the Faculty of Political Sciences), Istanbul University, ...etc.. In addition, a substantial number of them have been educated in prestigious (both private and state) elite high schools.

As noted by Putnam (1976: 51), like the ancient Oxbridge Colleges of England, the elites grandes ecoles of France, the Law School of Tokyo University, Makerere University College in East Africa, Tunisia's Sadiki College, the National University of Mexico City, the Political Science Faculty of

Ankara University is the foremost traditional elite school in Turkey. Graduation from this school substantially increases the chances of youth accessing an elite position in the elite recruitment process.

Table 1
 The Major Factors Connected With Elite Recruitment Process

			ELITE GROUP			Total
			Political	Trade Union	Media	
factors on occupational position	personal abil.-chance	Count	4	8	4	16
		% within factors on occupational position	25.0%	50.0%	25.0%	100.0%
		% within ELGROUP	13.3%	26.7%	13.3%	17.8%
	personal ability-education	Count	13	11	10	34
		% within factors on occupational position	38.2%	32.4%	29.4%	100.0%
		% within ELGROUP	43.3%	36.7%	33.3%	37.8%
	personal ability-family background	Count	5	7	8	20
		% within factors on occupational position	25.0%	35.0%	40.0%	100.0%
		% within ELGROUP	16.7%	23.3%	26.7%	22.2%
	education-chance	Count		1		1
		% within factors on occupational position		100.0%		100.0%
		% within ELGROUP		3.3%		1.1%
ideology and civil soc. understand.	Count	3	3	1	7	
	% within factors on occupational position	42.9%	42.9%	14.3%	100.0%	
	% within ELGROUP	10.0%	10.0%	3.3%	7.8%	
family background-education	Count	5		5	10	
	% within factors on occupational position	50.0%		50.0%	100.0%	
	% within ELGROUP	16.7%		16.7%	11.1%	
personal abilities	Count			2	2	
	% within factors on occupational position			100.0%	100.0%	
	% within ELGROUP			6.7%	2.2%	
Total	Count	30	30	30	90	
	% within factors on occupational position	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%	100.0%	
	% within ELGROUP	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Another important factor which is related to the question of education is having had a western education. Western educated individuals have had more priority and chances in accessing elite positions in Turkish society for centuries. As mentioned earlier, the intellectuals who had had a western education and contacts played significantly important roles, both in the early attempts at modernisation and in the Kemalist Revolution in Turkey. As mentioned by Frey (1965) and Putnam (Putnam, 1976: 126-7), Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's revolutionary elite, integrated in terms of social background, recruitment patterns, solidarity and value consensus, successfully ruled Turkey

for nearly three decades. Nevertheless, after the late 1940s this Kemalist unity was fractured both by “the resurrection of severe intra-elite conflict” and by the induction into the elite of new and highly heterogeneous elements. This created “simultaneous stagnation and instability” in Turkey for decades.

Another important factor is family background. This has both direct and indirect effects on the elite recruitment process. A higher social origin provides not only good financial, educational and occupational opportunities for the people but also good connections to obtain higher social positions.

Personality and personal abilities are also very important social psychological factors in the circulation of elites in Turkey. Most of the Turkish elites mentioned these factors as the answer to the question of “according to your opinion, which variables had been most effective for your actual social and occupational position?” Personality and personal ability are effective in the elite recruitment process either separately or in association with other variables, such as education and family background. This result may be related to the mean age of Turkish elites. The average age of elite respondents is nearly 50. This means that a large majority of contemporary Turkish elites have been socialised in 1960s youth culture and they are the beneficiaries of this cultural tradition.

The other two important factors which have an effect on the elite recruitment process are chance and ideology. As seen in **Table 1**, these factors, especially chance, have an important degree of influence on elite circulation either individually or in coalition with the factors of personality and education.

7. THE GENERAL FINDINGS, DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

Elite studies have great importance within sociological and political studies, because elites are the main agents of social change. They manage the direction, the speed and the form of social change, because they hold institutional power and influence social decisions on a macro level, and they can affect the political outcomes within society

This study predominantly uses the framework of the structural perspective. The researcher began with a formal definition of a set of positions, then those people who held these positions were identified as the elite. At the second stage of the proceedings, the key positions in the major elite

sectors were defined. Finally, the occupiers of these key positions were accepted as the elite. The holders of these key positions may be labelled the “super elite”, as Alcazar and Pizarro did (in Moore, 1985: 169).

Three major sectors were originally examined for reasons that were mentioned at the beginning. The sample concentrated on a smaller and more exclusive elite circle, because the aim of the study was to examine “the ruling elites”, in Turkish society. It was decided to take equal numbers of leaders from each of these three sectors for accuracy of sampling.

At the end of a detailed investigation, it was concluded that education is the most important factor for elite recruitment in Turkish society. Among trade union leaders, higher education is obviously less important than for the other elite groups. Also, the number of prestigious school graduated Turkish trade union elites is lower than for the other elite groups. When the educational levels of Turkish elites are compared the situation becomes more meaningful. Whereas the military elite and political elite possess the highest educational levels, the labour union elite have the lowest educational level among all the elite groups. This situation may be explained by the nature of the occupation of the labour union elite. Their occupation does not require higher skills and higher education. This can also be related to their class background: as explained above, there is a relationship between class origin and attendance at prestigious private schools. A privileged background provides people with privileged opportunities and these opportunities provide access to an elite status.

As Hoffmann notes (in G. Moore, 1985: 67) a college degree is a nearly universal precondition for recruitment to elite positions. This precondition is valid for the elite recruitment process in Turkey too. Al most all Turkish elites possess at least a high school (lycee) degree. In addition the vast majority of Turkish elites possess a university degree. An important proportion of them have post-university (Masters, PhD, Postdoctoral, etc.) degrees too.

The media elites and political elites share similar social backgrounds in terms of certain variables. The members of these two elite groups have a relatively higher social class background than the Turkish labour union elites. Nevertheless, the members of the three elite groups are predominantly recruited from middle and upper middle classes; approximately 70 percent of both the Turkish political elite and media elite have a middle and upper middle class background. On the other hand,

whereas about 17 percent of labour union elites come from blue collar or lower white collar families that are the most disadvantaged classes, only 7 percent of media elites and 3 percent of political elites have a lower class background. Also, none of the current labour union elites have an upper class background, although 7 percent of both the political and media elite come from upper class families.

The other important finding of the research is that the Turkish elites have a higher level consensually unified national elite character. There is a high degree of consensus among the Turkish elite groups. Also, there exists both a fundamental and operative consensus inside each elite group. This consensus can be called an “internal consensus

However, over generalisation and formulation are not sufficient to analyse and explain the special characteristics of Turkish society. This deficiency occurs especially when one examines and analyses the Turkish army, Turkish military elites and their place in the national power structure of society. In a way different from most other countries, where modernisation first began, the Turkish military elite are the powerful guardians of the secular-democratic system and the other values of the Kemalist Turkish Revolution.

Whereas the army was one of the most degenerate and corrupt institutions of the late Ottoman era until the early nineteenth century, after the abolition of the Janissaries and the beginning of serious modernisation efforts at the time of Selim III and Mahmut II and following periods, this institution became one of the most modernised within society. It became the dynamo of modernisation and westernisation. It is not surprising that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who was one of the most important leaders of the twentieth century, was a member of the military elite.

Several socio-political events which took place in the 1990s, clearly showed that Turkish military elites have a very important place in the democratic power structure. The events also confirmed that the relative autonomy of the military elites (from the governing elites and other elites) have great importance in the preservation of democracy. Also these events showed that elected political elites who symbolise democracy, might be dangerous for the democratic system. Turkish military elites maintained democracy in co-operation with other democratic elites against the despotism and tyranny of the elected political elites. All these facts clearly prove the invalidation of the idea of “the army as the potential enemy of democracy and democratic regimes”.

Like other elite groups, military elites are a social reality and a part of the power structure of society. The systematic formation of all the elite groups, such as political, business, media, bureaucratic, judiciary, military, scientific constitute the national power structures of societies. There is no need to criticise the sensitivity of the military elites in protecting democracy; their concern about the increasing socio-political and economic problems; and their solidarity and co-operation with the other elite groups to find some solution to these problems. All these events do not contradict the basic principles of democracy and democratic elite theories. If something has to be criticised, it must be the insensitivity, incapacity and individual greed of the elected political elites.

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