

THE TURKISH POWER ELITE

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1. INTRODUCTION

According to Mills (1956: 363), it is not too difficult to understand the middle classes, but understanding the very top of modern society needs discovery and description. This is a very difficult task, because they are usually inaccessible, busy and secretive. It is always difficult to get information about their backgrounds, their characters and their activities. In spite of all these difficulties, the purpose of this paper is to find the answers to these and similar questions: questions relating to the existence of the power elite and the structure of power in Turkey.

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 its subject. As also discussed earlier, 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.

Elite theory is one of the major theories which aims to analyse and explain the power structure and power relations. It investigates power and control and aims to analyse elite and non-elite (mass, public) differentiation. Elite theorists are concerned almost exclusively with on inequalities based on power or lack thereof. This distinguishes elite theory 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. But, as Etzioni (1993: 19) stressed, elite theory is concerned primarily with the other resources which are related to it.

According to elite theory (Jary & Jary, 1991: 188), societies are divided into the “few” who hold power and rule, and the “many” who are ruled. The ruling group called an elite, effectively monopolises power and makes the important decisions. The others

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(non-elites), the public or the masses have relatively no power and no choice but to accept the decision of the minorities.

Four major power blocs can be distinguished which dominate people's lives in contemporary Turkey: military, economic (business), political and media blocs. These four most powerful elite groups form the "Turkish Power Elite". Decisive power has become centralised into the hands of these groups of people. They share similar social backgrounds and educational careers; they went to the same or similar types of schools and universities; they have similar careers and life styles; and they share common sets of values, beliefs, attitudes and norms. In relation to these, it is possible to observe a high degree of uniformity, homogeneity and relative integration.

Sometimes, these elite groups are labelled the "national elites". The national elites are those who occupy the key command positions of the major nation-wide institutional hierarchies of power and wealth. They have the greatest share of the national system of status, power, wealth and institutional prestige. Military and business elites come first in the rank order of the Turkish national power system. They have a greater share in the national power structure. Political elites and media elites follow them. This order depends on the time and conditions: the place of the elites in this ranking is interchangeable.

This study was designed not only as quantitative research, but also as a qualitative cross-sectional national elite survey. Respondents are holders of elite positions in various sectors, i.e.- political elites, business elites, military elites, mass-media elites, trade and labour unions elites. Therefore, the study has a comparative character, like the German National Elite Study 1981 (carried out by Ursula Hoffmann-Lange), studies of national elites in the United States (**Barton: 1985**) and Australia (**Higley et al.: 1979**). Moreover, the study has an international comparative nature, because many questions asked in the previously mentioned national elite studies, were also used in this study.

2. METHODOLOGY

The multi-method approach was used in this study (**Moyser & Wagstaffe, 1987**). Both the "reputational" and "positional" approaches were used for identifying the elites: the positional approach was used to identify the individuals who have a potential for power because of their status and social position within society; the reputational approach was used to select those respondents who have a reputation for power and influence.

The positional approach was used to define the elite universe. Firstly, a list of elite sectors was set up. Following this, the most important organisations within each sector were specified. Then, the top positions within each organisation were determined. Finally, the current incumbents of these positions were considered as members of the elite. Furthermore, the reputational approach was also used as a supplementary approach to select the effective members of some elite groups, such as mass-media elites and political elites following the simple random sampling techniques.

No single source of data or data collecting techniques was chosen. The study was operationalised using the multiple methods of observation, documentary analysis and focused interviews. The majority of the data which is used in this study was obtained from field research and documentary sources. Observations helped the researcher to get more detailed and reliable information concerning elites and the existence and operation of elite organisations.

In addition to field research using questionnaires and semi-structured interview schedules, written and printed materials were used for data collecting. The data archives, publications and bulletins of the related private and state institutions

As Hertz and Imber argue (1995: 78), semi-structured interviews have a very special importance for meso and macro level elite studies. Following this tradition, these particular types of interview techniques were chosen. The questionnaire will be used for semi-structured interviews to get more detailed and specific data from the field. In addition to completely structured questions, open-ended (unstructured) questions have also been used. In general, semi-structured questionnaires have been widely used in elite studies and have great popularity amongst elite researchers. This particular kind of interview schedule is more suitable and valuable than the fully structured or unstructured questionnaire for realising the major goals of this research. It will be especially helpful in gaining more detailed information about the respondents' social backgrounds, attitudes, beliefs, values, behaviour and roles.

A total of 84 questions have been used in the interview schedule. All the questions have special purposes to realise. Whilst some of them aim to measure single peculiarities, others have multiple targets. The research has both a qualitative and quantitative character. Nevertheless, it is especially a descriptive kind of quantitative research. The data was analysed using the SPSS program (Fielding, 1994).

3. ELITE AND NATIONAL ELITES

The concept of elite comes from the French. Arslan explains (1995: 3) that, "elite" originally derived from the Latin "eligere" which means select, shares a common basis with "electa" that means elected or the best. Bottomore has demonstrated that the term "elite" was used to describe commodities of particular excellence in the seventeenth century. The usage was later extended to refer to superior social groups, such as prestigious military units or higher ranks of the nobility. However, it was not widely used in social and political studies until the late nineteenth century (Arslan, 1995: 3). The elite concept acquired world-wide popularity in social science as a result of the writings of Italian sociologists Vilfredo Pareto (1968) and Gaetano Mosca (1939) in the nineteenth century. Then it became popular in Britain and America in the 1930s.

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.

According to this theoretical definition, the term elite does not necessarily involve only the occupier of the top strata. It may comprise both those people who are at the top, bottom or outside the organisations. Also it may include the people in the capitalist, middle or working class. Power, control and influence are major words in this definition. If the people have power actively or potentially, they have a direct or indirect effect on the decision-making process and are controlling the social resources they can be identified as the elite. Their class positions or organisational positions are not a major criterion in this description. This theoretical definition will be used during this study except sampling procedure.

For pragmatic methodological purposes and simplification, a "positional" definition of elites will be used during the sampling procedure. In accordance with the positional approach, elite can be defined as those people who occupy a position at or near the top of important institutional hierarchies, such as economic, political, judicial,

civil service, military, mass media, educational. They have power because of their social positions.

On the other hand, Higley (1979: 29) defines national elites as “those people who hold power individually, regularly and seriously to affect political outcomes at the macro level of organised societies”. The researcher of this paper will conceptualise the national elites as those people who occupy the key command positions of the major nation-wide institutional hierarchies of power and wealth. They have the greatest share from the national system of status, power, wealth and institutional prestige. Military and business elites come first in the rank order of Turkish national power system. They have greater share in the national power structure. Political elites and media elites follow them. This order depends on the time and conditions: the place of the elites in this rank is interchangeable

4. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE TURKISH POWER ELITE

As Lewis argues (1961: 4-5), there was a large Balkan influence on the Ottoman ruling class. Large numbers of Balkan Christians entered the political and military elites of the Ottoman Empire through the channel of the “*devsirme*”, or the levy of boys. Also, the local Christian landed ruling class mostly survived and was incorporated into the Ottoman system. In fact, the Turkish elements in the ruling political and military elite were not large in the period of the Ottoman Empire. As stressed by Lewis (1961: 35), the Muslim citizens of the Ottoman Empire, who possessed a military, bureaucratic and feudal character, knew only four professions; government, war, religion and agriculture. Trade and industry were left to non-Muslims.

The ideas of the French Revolution began to have an impact on the Muslim Turks at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Parallel to the influence of this development and the first serious modernisation efforts, a new but powerful elite emerged in the mid nineteenth century. Unlike the traditional Ottoman power elite, “not from the army, not from the ‘Ulema’, but from the Translation Office and the Embassy secretariats” (Lewis, 1961: 116, 125).

Nevertheless, the twentieth century would introduce a new elite group to Turkey who possessed the knowledge, capability, the sense of responsibility and power to carry through the great social and political revolution that created modern Turkey. The new elite was well educated and was characterised by a highly heterogeneous background. Lewis argued that (1961: 455-6), the following powerful elite groups emerged in Turkey in the late Ottoman Era: military elites, media elites, bureaucratic elites and judicial elites.

The Turkish Revolution was carried out by the military elite. After the Turkish War of Independence most of the victorious commanders became the political elite in the Turkish parliament. Also, the leaders of the first Turkish political parties were ex-military elites (such as Atatürk, İnönü, Cebesoy and Karabekir). Military elites gained decisive political relevance and became important members of the Turkish power elite. In fact, Turkish military elites played a substantial role in the history of contemporary Turkey, sometimes overtly, sometimes covertly.

Nevertheless, the influence of Turkish military elites in the socio-political life of Turkey can not be simply reduced to the military background of the leaders of the Turkish Revolution. As stated by most of the influential western writers, the Turkish Revolution and Independence Movement were civil movements, despite the military background of their leaders. On the other hand, it has to be remembered that, military elites have been very well educated individuals in Turkish society. The quality and

quantity of their knowledge always added to their power alongside their sheer physical power.

Another important factor is that, there was not a capitalist class in Turkey in the early Republican period. The Turkish economy was based on agriculture and trade at that time. The Turkish bourgeoisie (in modern meaning) began to develop in the Republican Era, but only became powerful in the multi-party period. Therefore, local leaders and local elites played important roles in the establishment of the Republic and development of Turkish society. There was in fact a predominance of military elites and local elites among the political elites in the early years of the Republic. Thus, the Turkish power elite was set up predominantly by political elites who had a military background.

The following statement gives some idea of the nature of the social structure of the new Turkey in the early years of the Republic: “At this moment, my listeners are farmers, artisans, merchants and workers. Any of these can become the antagonist of another. But, who can deny that the farmer needs the artisan, the artisan the farmer, the farmer the merchant, and all of them need one another and the worker”. (Kemal Atatürk’s speech, Izmir Economic Congress, in 1923).

Socio-economic activities and effort by the Kemalist government created new elements in the social hierarchy that had never existed before: businessmen, managers and technicians. It meant that the emergence of the Turkish capitalist class was on its way. As noted by Lewis (1961: 466), of course there had been middle class elements in Turkey before, but they were neither Turkish nor Muslim. The Greek, Armenian and Jewish merchants and entrepreneurs were an important part of Ottoman society. The new Turkish capitalist class began to appear in the 1940s as a powerful partner in the power structure. This changed the balance of socio-political forces in the country.

Like the capitalist class, the working class which is an inseparable part of the capitalist system was a relatively new phenomenon in Turkey. In the nineteenth century, the number of workers was not more than a couple of thousand. The first workers organisations began to appear in Turkey in the late 19th century. These included the Ameleperver Cemiyeti (Society in Favour of Workmen-founded in 1871), Osmanli Amele Cemiyeti (Ottoman Labour Society-founded in 1895). As Lewis (1961: 469) shows, trade unions were permitted, except in public enterprises. Nevertheless, a genuine labour organisation, in its contemporary meaning -as the representative of the working class- emerged as the result of efforts by Kemalist governments in the twentieth century. The number of labour unions increased from 73 in 1940, to 239 in 1952. As noted by Lewis (1961: 471), an all-Turkish federation of unions was formed in Izmir in 1952 with an estimated membership of 150,000 workers.

The composition of the power elite changed parallel to the social, political and economic development of Turkish society. The contemporary Turkish power elite is now composed of economic, military, political and media elites. As stressed by Mills (1956: 277-8), the Marxists’ “economic determinism”, and the liberals’ “political determinism” or “media and military determinism” are not sufficient to explain the reality of the power elite.

Although the Turkish power elite was set up by the business elites, political elites, military elites and media elites, this does not mean that there is no elite from any other elite group in the power elite. But the fact is that the power elite is heavily dominated by the most powerful members of the most powerful elite groups. The supremacy of the power of the military elites, economic corporations, and political directorate is

unavoidable. The emergence of the power of the media within the power elite is a recent phenomenon and intimately related to technological developments in the media sector.

5. THE TURKISH POWER ELITE

The findings on the Turkish power elite are rather similar to that of C. W. Mills. According to Mills, in America in the 1950s, there were three most vigorous and influential elite groups within the power structure which were political elites, business elites and military elites. These elite groups had social inter-connections, common interests and affairs and similar social backgrounds. The results of this study confirm the existence of a "power elite" in Turkey which is constructed by a group of individuals occupying top positions in several organisations. In accordance with the ideas of C.W. Mills (1956), the members of these most powerful and most influential elite groups form the "Turkish Power Elite".

Differing from Mills' findings, there are four key elite groups in Turkey. The most dominant elite groups in contemporary Turkey are political elites, business elites, military elites and media elites. The unity of these four key elite groups constitutes the Turkish power elite which formulates the most significant policy issues and make macro level social, economic and political decisions. Their power is inevitable and their influence is often irresistible because they are well organised and co-ordinated. They control the state and the elite recruitment process. Briefly, they control the lives of millions of people. Like Spanish elites (**Alcazar and Pizarro in G. Moore, 1985: 150**), they are closely integrated and relatively united.

To Field and Higley (**1980: 17-20**), the elitist paradigm concerns the consensual unified elite. They argue that elites are imperfectly unified and representative institutions are highly unstable, especially in modern developing countries. Parallel to Field and Higley's argument, contemporary Turkish elites present a unified elite character, although not perfectly.

On the other hand, 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 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. They are predominant over other groups and these dominant groups know what others do not know and can do what others cannot do.

In brief, the Turkish power elites are the most powerful and wealthy people in society. They define the final shape of socio-political and economic decisions. They not only define the roles of millions of Turkish people, they also define the future of Turkish society. These people can get their own way despite opposition. They are the gatekeepers of society.

The Turkish power elites hold institutionalised power and influence the decision making/taking process incessantly and effectively. They control the social resources (such as wealth, prestige and status) and personal resources (such as charisma, time, motivation and energy). They define the way and the direction of society which has to be followed.

6. SOCIAL COMPOSITION AND CONSEQUENCE OF THE TURKISH POWER ELITE

The study showed without any doubt that the Turkish power elite exists; there is relative cohesion and unity among its members; and they exercise control over decisions. As stated by Mills (1956: 283), as a member of the power elite, they define each other as among those who accordingly must be taken into account.

The Turkish power elite, or in other words the key elites of contemporary Turkish society, are composed of people of similar social origins, similar educational backgrounds and similar occupational careers. Also, they have similar life styles and views, and they are increasingly co-ordinated. Nevertheless, as noted by Mills (1956: 20), this co-ordination is not total and continuous. The top of the power hierarchy are more powerful, because they are more unified. The bottom of society (non-elites) is rather weak, because they are more fragmented.

The power elite are not only the people who have succeeded but are also the wielders of the patronage of success. As Mills said (1956: 347), they interpret and apply to individuals the criteria of success. The shadow power elite and aspirant power elite are usually members of this clique. Also, as stated by Mills (1956: 83), the people in the higher political, economic, military and even media circles represent an elite of money and power. They are the biggest share holders in the national hierarchy of status, power and wealth.

The findings on the Turkish power elites can be outlined as follows:

- There are inter-class marriages among the members of the Turkish power elite
- They have attended similar or the same types of exclusive private and state schools
- Their actual social status is similar or even interchangeable
- They are members of the exclusive school fraternities and elite clubs
- They enjoy common or similar life-styles
- They possess exceptional advantages of social origins and training (family and education)
- They were born into mostly middle and upper-middle class families, and upper class family background makes up an important proportion of the Turkish power elite
- There is a very large male domination among them and females are underrepresented in the Turkish power elite
- They are overwhelmingly middle aged although older people make up the second largest group.

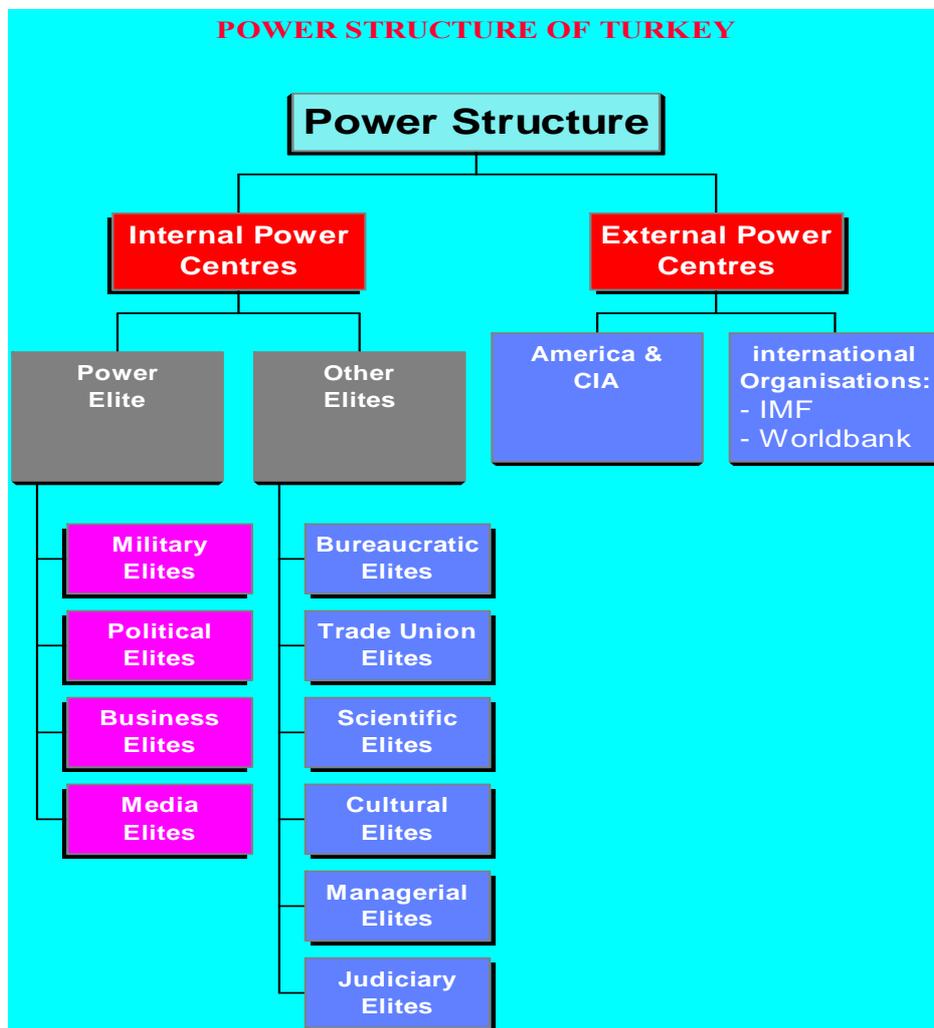
Turkish power elite cannot merely be defined as those people who are ordinary bureaucrats doing their duty. They determine not only their own duties but also the roles and duties of the entire Turkish population. They give orders to Turkish society, direct the dominant institutions and control the state apparatus. They define the rules which have to be followed by the Turkish people. They direct the speed and route of social change. Ultimately they take/make the decisions and define the major targets of Turkish society.

7. GENERAL POWER STRUCTURE OF TURKEY

The power structure of Turkish society is neither elitist nor pluralist in itself: no single elite group is dominant in socio-political issues and decisive power has not been diffused among the numerous elite groups. In reality, the power structure of Turkey only can be explained by using the theories of the demo-elite perspective.

There are two major power centres in Turkey: “internal power centres” and “external power centres”. During the field research several Turkish elites repeatedly mentioned that, there were a number of external power centres which are influential on the socio-political decision making process in Turkey. America and specifically the National intelligence agency (CIA) occupies the first and most powerful position among these external power centres. In addition, certain international organisations have some degree of influence on particular issues: for example, the IMF and Worldbank have an important influence on economic affairs.

Figure 1



On the other hand, as shown in **Figure 1 (Arslan, 1999: 268)**;, there are about ten major internal power centres dominated by the major elite groups. They form the higher circles of the nation. None of these elite groups have the same degree of power, wealth and prestige in the national power system: whereas some of them are more influential on the national decision making process, others have little influence. The four major elite groups have the greatest share of national power: political elites, military elites, business elites and media elites. These people comprise the power elite or “the invisible government” of Turkey:

- army generals, military apex
- the corporate rich, industrial executives
- the political directorate, political party leaders and cabinet ministers
- media chieftains, famous journalists and editors (both television and newspaper).

Thus, there are several elite groups in the national power structure of Turkey. The big four which are political, military, business and media institutions are highly autonomous centres of national power in contemporary Turkey. Money, prestige and power is concentrated in the hands of higher politicians, admirals and generals, the owners and executives of the larger corporations, effective journalists and editors. No university rector has the power and influence wielded by a member of the general staff. No trade union leader is as influential as a businessman in the decision making process. None of the highest rank bureaucrats can put pressure on the political leaders in the way a powerful journalist can.

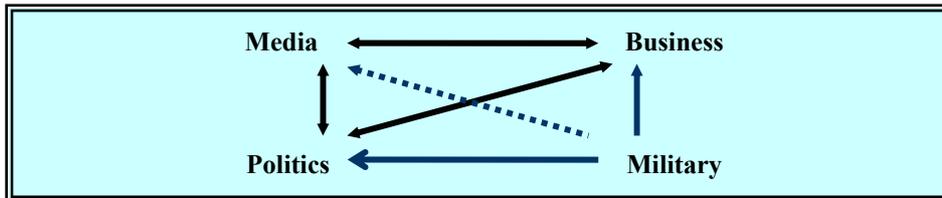
Every member of the power elite takes into account the other members views: for example, when a political decision is about to be taken, the political directorate knows that the views of the highest rank army generals have to be taken into account. They know that, if the army elite are against a potential decision, they cannot realise their plans.

8. POSITIONAL INTERCHANGEABILITY IN TURKISH POWER ELITE

Executive ascendancy in political, military, business institutions and effective members of the media form the Turkish power elite which is at the centre of power and national decision making. Ordinary people are restricted by education, qualification, social origin as well as age and gender in accessing these elite positions.

The top roles and top positions are inter-changeable: there has been a personnel exchange between the military, business and political establishments. The direction of this traffic has always been from the military to other establishments. All high-ranking Turkish military professionals have been trained in the management of violence. Theoretically, their educational and career backgrounds, and their abilities in the management of the movements of human and materials greatly increase the transferability of their skills from military to civilian roles. When members of the military elite retire, many of them become members of the boards of directors of large private corporations or strategic bureaucratic committees. Also, some of them are involved in active politics. The direction of this interchangeability among the big four domains is shown in **Figure 2 (Arslan, 1999: 270)**.

Figure 2
Positional Interchangeability in the Turkish Power Elite



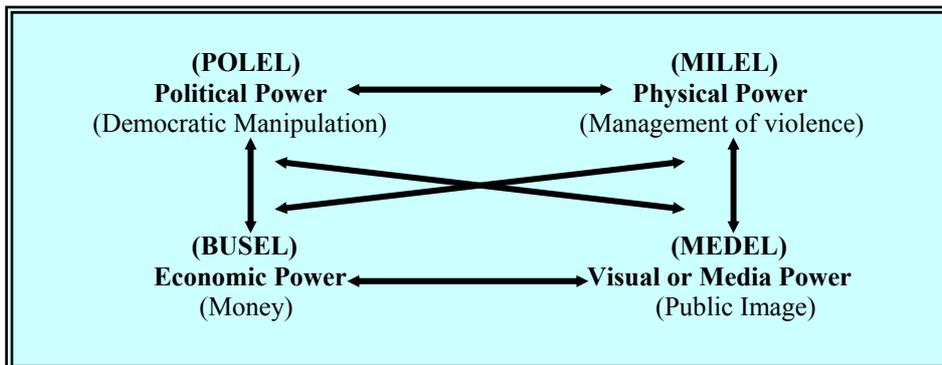
Whereas it is possible to talk about interchangeability between media, business and economic elites, in reality one can only talk about changeability for the military elites. In other words, theoretically a member of the military elite can become a businessman, politician or journalist. However, none of the political elites, media elites or business elites have the opportunity to become a member of the military elite, either theoretically or in practice in Turkey. This is due to the military elite being carefully selected and their special training and military career begins at an early age. The social similarities and psychological affinities of the members of the power elite increase the interchange between these orders.

9. THE DIVISION OF LABOUR AMONG THE MEMBERS OF THE POWER ELITE

All elite groups have special roles and functions within the power elite: the military elites provide physical power and the management of violence, business elites provide economic power and money, and political elites provide political power and the tools for democratic manipulation. The role of the media is to create a public image (Arslan, 1999: 271).

They need to work in order to co-ordinate and realise their common interests. Because, all the members of the power elite are inter-dependent on each other. For example, political elites need business elites for money, the media elites for the creation of a public image, and the military elites for physical power and the management of violence

Figure 3
Interdependence Between the members of the Power Elite



SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION:

As explained by Mills (1956: 363), it is not too difficult to understand the middle classes, but understanding the very top of modern society needs discovery and description. This is a very difficult task, because they are usually inaccessible, busy and secretive. It is always difficult to get information about their backgrounds, their characters and their activities. In spite of all these difficulties, the purpose of this study is to find the answers to these and similar questions: questions relating to the existence of the power elite and the structure of power in Turkey.

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