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TURKEY BETWEEN SECULARISM AND ISLAMISM

Jacob M. Landau

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Past Secularist Reforms

When Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk) founded the Republic of Turkey in 1923 (he was its president until his death fifteen years later), he set as his main objective the modernization of the new republic. His preferred means was speedy, intensive secularization and, indeed, every one of his reforms was tied up with disestablishing Islamic institutions from their hold on Turkey's politics, economics, society, and cultural life.

Under his guidance, elected parliaments (comprising the only legal party, of which he was the chairman) passed, in rapid succession, a number of daring laws. Among these, probably the most revolutionary were those on education and the legal system. The former uprooted the religious element from all schools, making secularized instruction compulsory; this meant a completely new set of curricula, textbooks, and teachers. The latter abolished all religious courts (Islamic, Christian and Jewish), setting up instead secular courts with sets of laws and procedures based on Western European, largely Swiss, models; this implied the preparation

of new laws and the training of new judges. To understand the boldness of this move, it should be remembered that in some of the other successor states of the Ottoman Empire, religious courts were abolished only much later — in Egypt, in 1956 — while in others they are still active, as in Israel and Lebanon.

Among the boldest new laws were those forbidding polygamy, and others equalizing women — in divorce proceedings, inheritance rights, and in passive (and, later, active) parliamentary elections. Yet other laws instituted Sunday as the day of rest (the only Muslim state to decree this), and the Gregorian calendar instead of the Hijri, pressed for European clothing, changed the script from Arabic to Latin, and moved the capital from Islamic-minded Istanbul to a more neutral Ankara.

All public agencies were mobilized to carry out the Kemalist reforms, chiefly the People's Party and the press and radio. The party inaugurated "People's Homes" and, in smaller places, "People's Rooms" to recommend and control reforms. The press, largely directed at the literate elites,

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor. 13 Tel-Hai St., Jerusalem, Israel; Tel. 02-5619281, Fax. 02-5619112, Internet: elazar@vms.huji.ac.il. In U.S.A.: 1616 Walnut St., Suite 507, Philadelphia, PA 19103; Tel. (215) 204-1459, Fax. (215) 204-7784. © Copyright. All rights reserved. ISSN: 0792-7304.

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continuously urged them to participate in the move for progress via modernization.

The Revival of Islamism

While active opposition to the secularization drive was rare (it had few avenues open to it anyway), a latent one persisted, chiefly in the rural areas. Indeed, the success of the Kemalist reforms was mostly noticeable in the cities and towns. Turkey's population at the time was heavily rural (about three-quarters of the total). The smaller a village was and the more remote from an urban center, the less it was affected by the new reforms. It rarely had a school of the new type, nor a court which could judge by Western codes of law or sanction civil marriage and divorce. Consequently, the local *hodja*, or religious dignitary, continued to teach the local children and officiate at weddings and divorces — all along the previous, Islamic lines.

The People's Party could have an effective impact only in the larger villages. The press arrived there, but few could read it, particularly in the mandatory Latin script. Radio, an effective tool, was of little use in the thousands of villages and hamlets which lacked electricity. Moreover, such organizations as the Islamic brotherhoods, officially prohibited, continued their existence from the pre-republican era, operating clandestinely and biding their time.

The occasion for Islam's re-entry into the political arena came, ironically, as a result of one of the aspects of modernization. After the end of World War II, a multi-party era started due to public pressure in Turkey and to inducement by its great ally, the United States. The first parliamentary multi-party elections were held in 1946. At the next ones, in 1950, the People's Party (now called the Republican People's Party) lost its parliamentary majority and its rival (the Democratic Party) governed for a whole decade. Its opening towards Islamically-oriented voters maintained it in power, a lesson not lost on any of Turkey's major political parties, then or later.

The Democratic Party did not restore the Islamic establishment to its earlier status. However, it did restore the Arabic call to prayer (instead of the Turkish) and allowed broadcasts of the Koran over the state-owned radio. Many new mosques were built and others repaired; Muslim tombs were reopened to the general public for devotions (on the pretext that they were historical monuments). More importantly, the general mood was openly changing. The authorities refrained from interfering with intensive religious instruction for children in rural localities. Substantial funds were

earmarked for institutes training preachers and prayer leaders; in these, almost half of the curriculum hours are invested in Arabic, the Koran, and religious instruction.

The decade of the Democratic Party's rule ended in 1960 with a military intervention. The armed forces considered themselves as the guardians of Kemalism and were annoyed by the party's partial withdrawal from secularism and other Kemalist principles. Hence they closed down the party and banned it. Otherwise, their *coup* had few tangible results. After the military had returned to their barracks and handed the government to an elected parliament, in 1961, there followed a period of liberalization. This was expressed mainly in limiting official censorship of the press and other publications. Not surprisingly, the 1960s was a decade when many clashing ideologies became a matter of public debate. Suggestively, the common ground of Marxist, chauvinist, and Islamist discourse was their criticism of Kemalism.

The Islamists invested most of their efforts during the 1960s (and, as we shall see, subsequently) in three domains: education, publishing, and organization. In addition to pressuring the authorities for increasing allocations to Islamic classes at school, Islamists promoted an ever growing number of Koran courses for adults in the villages. A great effort was invested in the publication and sale of low-cost Islamic literature: works on Islam, the life of its Prophet and other leaders, Islamic history and mysticism, commentaries on the Koran, works explaining the dogmas and rites of Islam, collections of Friday sermons, as well as school textbooks and translation of Islamic classics into Turkish. These were supplemented by many Islamic-minded dailies, weeklies and monthlies, whose circulation rose parallel to the increase in literacy. Organizational activities were carried out on two levels: via Islamic philanthropic associations, whose number grew annually, and via underground activities of various Islamic groups which were not officially allowed to associate legally. All these served as recruitment centers of support for the first Islamic political party in the history of the republic.

Open Political Involvement

The fact that Turkey's constitutions insulated politics from religion did not prevent the foundation of an Islamist party in 1970. The time seemed ripe for the Islamists to get out of the political wilderness and attempt to rejoin the mainstream. The Party for National Order was established on January 26, 1970. Under

different names, but with the same leader and ideology, it survives to this day. Although it could not define itself outright as a religious grouping, the Islamist press hailed the party enthusiastically, so that its main characteristics were never in doubt. It started immediately to set up branches throughout Turkey, in the smaller towns and villages, especially among the religious circles.

Although the party's program and speeches emphasized its democratic views, a close look reveals its Islamist character. Its program stresses its support for spiritual values in carefully selected terms of Arabic origin, frequently employed in Islamist publications (instead of original Turkish ones and neologisms introduced by Kemalist innovators). It advocated freedom of conscience, but interpreted this to mean freedom for the religious, viz. Islamic education. Without openly condemning secularism, it rejected any sort of secularism which could be understood as hostile to Islam. Thus, when the second military intervention occurred in March 1971, it was not unexpected that judicial proceedings were instituted against the party before the Constitutional Court which, in May 1971, ordered its dissolution on the ground that it was seeking "to restore a theocratic order in Turkey."

The National Salvation Party

One-and-a-half years later, on October 11, 1972, the party was reconstituted by a group of politicians who had been involved in the Party for National Order. Renamed the National Salvation Party, it was active for eleven years, successfully bringing Islam into the center of Turkish politics. By the summer of 1973, the party was a going concern in all of Turkey's 67 provinces, gearing itself for the parliamentary elections in October of that year. Running for the first time, the party achieved impressive results: it obtained 11.8 percent of the vote and 48 seats (out of a total of 450) in the National Assembly, thus becoming the third largest parliamentary group, after the two mass parties, the Republican People's Party and the Justice Party (successor to the banned Democratic Party).

This success was due to the party's tactics, such as having religious functionaries praise it in the mosques (thus flaunting the laws), and by presenting in its propaganda an effective mixture of Islamic treatise and socio-economic preaching, making up a compact message delivered in simple terms, directed both at believers and at the unsophisticated, needy, or disgruntled. To the faithful, it intimated that it would be sinful not to vote for the only party which really cared about

Islam and the restoration of its standing in public life, in education, and, at least by implication, in politics. To the needy and disgruntled, it promised change, introducing itself as the sole political group opposing large capital and championing the little man by advocating an overhaul of the political and economic system. As a result, the main electoral support for the National Salvation Party in 1973 came from the deeply religious and needy population in Central and Eastern Anatolia. This lesson was not lost on the party in subsequent years.

The ideology of the National Salvation Party was embodied in a thinly veiled program to restore Islam in state and society and turn it into the major factor in Turkey. Fearing legal proceedings which might close down the party (as had happened to the Party for National Order in 1971), its spokesmen campaigned for moral progress, postulating a virtuous society, proud of its glorious heritage and ancient traditions. The party considered the entire country as a school, in which religious instruction should be the core of all education. The goal of moral progress was tied up with material progress, geared to improving the financial lot of the have-nots — a combination characteristic of the propaganda of Islamic groups in other Muslim countries at that time, such as Egypt.

The top leadership of the party was made up of lawyers and technological experts, grouped around the party's founder and chairman, Necmettin Erbakan, himself a professor of motor technology. Most, possibly all, had a religious background, with support groups among the Islamic-minded. It was Erbakan, however, who made all important decisions. Born in 1926, he studied at Istanbul's Technical University, was sent to Aachen for further study, returned to teach in Istanbul, and later entered politics. In 1969, he ran successfully for the National Assembly, getting three times more votes than he needed for his seat in the conservatively religious province of Konya. When he first entered the National Assembly in 1970, he prayed there publicly, stirring considerable comment. After his Party for National Order was banned, he set up the National Salvation Party and led it successfully in the 1973 elections. The political pamphlets he has published, often read and discussed by his admirers, offer an indication of some of his views on Islam (no source of truth outside Islam), a national development plan (the best for one and all), and the Common Market (a Catholic association, supported by Zionists and freemasons, hence noxious to Turkey's interests).

Inside the Government and Outside

Early in 1974, as the third largest group in the National Assembly, the National Salvation Party was in a tactically convenient position to form a government coalition with either the Republican People's Party or its rival, the Justice Party. The former was moderately left of center, the latter moderately right of center. Since the National Salvation Party was the champion of Islam, first and foremost, it could coalesce with either — and it did, first with the former, then with the latter (as happened, somewhat later, with religious parties in Israel). In both cases, Erbakan became Deputy Prime Minister and his colleagues received economic portfolios, which they put to good use to bolster their popular support.

The Islamic-related activities and attitudes of the party's cabinet ministers are of special interest, as they are characteristic of the previous and subsequent stand of the protagonists of Islamism and their antagonism to the secularization of Turkey. Examples are: unsuccessful bills in parliament to change the official weekend holiday from Sunday to Friday, or to make everyone offending Allah in behavior or speech guilty of a serious misdemeanor. The number of religious functionaries was increased, as was the amount of time earmarked for religious broadcasts on the state radio. A much-publicized drive was started against both gambling and drinking and selling of alcohol, as was an anti-obscenity drive in all publications: books, newspapers, photographs, films, records and tapes. The widest interpretation was given to obscenity, which was applied also to art as a ban on nude statues.

While such measures increased the party's popularity with certain circles, it may have caused some antagonism in others. In the 1977 elections, its vote declined and its group in the National Assembly fell to 24. Even so, the party's activities were viewed with suspicion by secularist groups, chiefly by the armed forces, who considered themselves as the preservers of Kemalism. In September 1980 the military intervened again, just after Erbakan had addressed a huge rally in Konya, openly calling for Islamism. They closed down all political parties and ruled alone for three years, after which they returned the government to the civilians via new parliamentary elections in 1983 in which the old parties were not permitted to participate.

Towards a *Refah* Cabinet

Several of the old political parties reconstituted themselves during the 1980s under new names. Erbakan re-formed his and called it the *Refah* or Prosperity

Party (sometimes referred to as the Welfare Party). It was led largely by the same people, published the same newspapers, and its ideological outlook was closely identified with that of the banned National Salvation Party. Since a new barrier of 10 percent of the overall vote had been written into the new 1982 Constitution as a pre-condition for any group's entry into the National Assembly, the *Refah* coalesced with another party and, in 1991, succeeded in obtaining 43 seats in the 450-seat Assembly. More certain of itself, it went alone in the 1995 elections, coming out first with 21.5 percent of the vote and 158 seats. This result — double, percentage-wise, that of 1973 — was largely due to the party's focus on helping the poor and underprivileged — socially, economically, and spiritually — especially in the municipalities which it controlled. The party's popular appeal was corroborated by the results of the local by-elections of November 1995, when it did even better, obtaining 30.4 percent of the vote. Following various ephemeral attempts to form a government without it, *Refah* was called upon to form a coalition cabinet headed by it. Set up on June 28, 1996, the cabinet comprised 19 ministers of *Refah* (including Prime Minister Erbakan) and 18 of its allies, the True Path Party, a moderately right-of-center grouping (successor to the banned Justice Party).

This was a striking success for *Refah* — and for the cause of Islamism. Erbakan and his colleagues and assistants started immediately to put in practice some of their tenets. In domestic policy, all the casinos were shut down to discourage gambling. In foreign affairs, the government distanced itself from the West by a rapprochement with Iran in the economic field (a long-term oil treaty), Libya, and other Islamic states. It has also worked strenuously at reversing, or at least slowing up, Turkey's increasingly cordial relations with Israel, chiefly in the military domain, but also in the economic and cultural spheres.

Future Prospects

It is too early to predict with any certainty the outcome of the power struggle between Islamism, led by *Refah*, and the secularist forces. One should note that the advances of Islamism in Turkey fit well into general Middle Eastern patterns. Libya, Sudan, Iran, and Pakistan have turned into Islamic theocracies in recent years, and Afghanistan is on the verge of becoming one too. In Algeria, the National Salvation Front won parliamentary elections, only to be frustrated from assuming power by a military intervention. As a result, the Islamists in Algeria have turned to terrorism.

Islamist physical violence against the government is frequent elsewhere, too, as in activities of extreme Islamist groups in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, in the Israeli-held territories, and in Israel itself.

The Turkish case is somewhat different, however: it has been a parliamentary democracy for the last seventy-three years. The Islamists have resorted there to achieving power via participation in competitive elections, shunning violence (except for a few rare cases). This affects but little, however, the feelings of frustration of the secularist majority, who fear lest the Islamists succeed in turning Turkey into an Islamic theocracy, distanced from the West and its civilization. Many feel that the military, who have already intervened to seize power three times in the last generation, form the last line of defense against Islamism, with their innate interest in Western technology and hardware. It is a commonly known secret in Turkey that they have vetoed Erbakan's attempt at a close military alliance with Iran as well as his demands for cancelling Turkey's arms deals with Israel. However, the armed

forces are in a difficult dilemma. A new military coup would undoubtedly damage Turkey's move to join the European Union, by tarnishing its democratic image. So the future is open at a time which seems crucial for Turkey's fate.

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Dr. Jacob M. Landau is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a Fellow of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. He has published extensively on the modern and contemporary Middle East. His most recent books include: *The Arab Minority in Israel, 1967-1991: Political Aspects* (Oxford University Press, 1993); *Jews, Arabs, Turks* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1993); *The Politics of Pan-Islam: Ideology and Organization* (Oxford University Press, 1994); and *Pan-Turkism: From Irredentism to Cooperation* (Indiana University Press, 1995).