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The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey: The Case of the Welfare Party

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ABSTRACT *This article provides an analytical discussion on the rise of political Islam in Turkey by examining the rise of the Islamic Welfare Party in the 1990s. The study, utilizing a historic analysis, reveals that the Islamic opposition in Turkey is both a reaction to Kemalist reforms and to undesirable local conditions, especially, economic distress, unjust distribution of national wealth, corruption, and perceived lack of freedom. Certain structural conditions aiding the Welfare Party to increase its power are also discussed. Many lessons learned in terms of managing the Islamic challenge and implications with respect to the prospect are addressed at the end.*

Introduction

The post-Cold War era has witnessed the rise of religion as a social and political movement around the globe, and by extension, religiously driven conflicts. This trend appears to be evident in the Muslim world, especially in the Middle East, although it is not limited to this particular region. Turkey is not an exception. Islamist oppositions, best represented by the rise of the Islamic Welfare Party (RP, *Refah Partisi*) in the 1990s, seriously challenged the secular state. Understanding the rise of political Islam in Turkey is important, since Turkey had long been regarded as a model country with a secular state, despite its predominantly Muslim population. Yet the growing power of the pro-Islamic RP caused anxiety in the West with respect to the future of the country. Also, Turkish society itself was divided into two major camps, roughly speaking: *Islamists* (those who advocate an Islamic state ruled by Islamic laws) and *secularists* (those who reject the idea of an Islamic state, although they mostly believe in Islam). This division brought about a new type of social conflict revolving around the issue of how to define Turkish identity, and more important, how to shape the political structure. Although the Constitutional Court banned the RP in 2001, its political ideals have not disappeared. Even at

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present, the Islamist-secularist conflict underlies many of the major social, political, and economic debates.

This study provides an analytical discussion on the rise of the Welfare Party. It starts with a brief history of political Islam before the RP, talking about the establishment of the secular Turkish state, after the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, and the tension it created with pro-Islamists. Then the growth of the RP and conditions leading to that will be discussed in detail. Many lessons learned in terms of managing the Islamist challenge and implications with respect to the prospect will also be addressed at the end.

Political Islam before the Welfare Party

A quick look at the Ottoman period suggests that although the Ottoman Empire may not be considered a fully Islamic state,¹ Islam significantly affected political and social life of the empire's peoples as the dominant religion. In the nineteenth century, Ottoman reformers, faced with the threat of European economic and political expansion and a shrinking empire, determined to modernize the state by abandoning Islamic political principles for a Western model of enlightened despotism. Throughout the century, in most areas of public and political life, ideologies other than Islam were pursued, and social life, including political life, was secularized.²

Succeeding in founding today's Turkish Republic, following the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, Mustafa Kemal wanted to redefine Islam. He was not content with separating Islam from politics, but wanted to remove its power base and subordinate it to the state because of the concern that Islam would become a major nest for resistance against the republican ideology and socio-economic reforms he was planning to implement.³ Hence, shortly after the founding of the Republic, a major campaign was launched against institutional and cultural basis of religion in the society. In 1924, the Caliphate was abolished and the Sharia was abandoned (to be replaced by the Swiss code in 1926). The next year witnessed the closure of the *tarikats* (religious cults) and the adoption of Western forms of hats, clothing and calendar. Islam was taken out of the constitution in 1928, and the state was officially declared secular in 1937.⁴ Accordingly, during Kemalist period, which continued until the late 1940s,⁵ further and more radical secularization occurred. Laicism emerged as one of the key principles of the new state, and religious expression came under strict government supervision and control.

It was not until 1950, 27 years after the establishment of the Republic and 12 years after Mustafa Kemal's death that the ruling secularists struck out in another direction. They felt confident enough to stage a multiparty election. That election was a turning point of the history of political Islam in the republican period. A new group, the Democrat Party (DP, *Demokrat Parti*) under the leadership of Adnan Menderes, a conservative farmer and land owner, came to power and began to move away from strict secular control of religion towards what was more comfortable for most people of Turkey. As opposed to Mustafa Kemal's revolutionary Republican People's Party (CHP, *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*), the DP reflected and emphasized tradition deeply influenced by religion. For this reason, the new ruling party quickly

received great support from the majority. Anatolian peasantry and small townspeople who had a hard time to digest the Kemalist reforms and the “Westernization” of the country were drawn to this new political party. Consequently, a softer attitude was adopted by the state toward religion. The call to prayer could once again be in Arabic instead of Turkish. Religion classes were made mandatory in public schools. The training of religious functionaries under state auspices was resumed. High schools focusing on Islamic studies (*Imam Hatip Liseleri*) were opened, which, over time, would turn out to resemble a modern form of the old religious schools.⁶ In short, the rigidity of the nationalist republican program began to subside.

There was a military coup in 1960, resulting in the banning of the DP. The implicit reference was made to the party’s tolerant attitude towards religion that had gone much beyond the state program.⁷ Shortly after the DP was closed, the Justice Party (AP, *Adalet Partisi*) succeeded it, intermittently held political power in the 1960s. The AP continued the same “soft” policy with respect to religion. As in the DP, many key positions in the AP were filled by religious figures and the party received a great deal of support from *tarikats* and other religious organizations.⁸

By utilizing the opportunity of tolerant policies of the DP and AP, the Islamic voice began to grow stronger, becoming more organized and independent throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The Islamists created an effective network including professional and business associations, women’s organizations, academic groups, Muslim human rights associations, and cultural societies. The common complaint was that the Islamic concerns were not given a fair hearing by secular counterparts. Thus the Islamic movement had to do its own business.

Religiously based political ideologies began to proliferate towards the end of the 1960s. In 1970, the first Islamic party came into existence under the name of the National Order Party (MNP, *Milli Nizam Partisi*). However, the Constitutional Court closed the party down one year later, in 1971 for using religion for political purposes. It re-emerged before the 1973 national elections under the name of the National Salvation Party (MSP, *Milli Selamet Partisi*), and gained a position such that no parliamentary majority could form on either right or left without its support, giving it considerable leverage. Yet the party was dissolved once again after the 1980 military coup, which banned all political parties for three years.

The Welfare Party

In 1983, the military left the political arena and subsequently, political parties were allowed to function again. The Welfare Party (RP, *Refah Partisi*) came into existence, in this respect, as the continuation of the MSP on July 19, 1983 under the leadership of Ali Türkmen. The party was quickly filled with former MSP members and in the same year, Necmettin Erbakan was elected to leadership. In 1987, the RP entered national elections and gained 7.3 percent of the registered votes, becoming the fourth largest party. In the next national elections in 1991, it doubled its votes, reaching the figure 16.2 percent. In the 1994 municipal elections, the party managed to reach 19.1 percent. The popularity of the RP reached its peak in the 1995 national elections,

whereby the party received the largest support with the figure 21.3 percent. The details of the elections and comparative results are shown in Table 1.⁹

Regarding the distribution of the votes, from 1987 to 1995, the RP's popularity did grow dramatically in all regions. The greatest success occurred in central and eastern

Table 1. The Results of National Elections

Parties	Their votes (in percentage)
<i>1987 National elections</i>	
Motherland Party	36.31
Social Democrat Populist Party	24.74
True Path Party	19.14
Welfare Party	7.26
Nationalist Movement Party	2.93
Reformist Democracy Party	0.82
Others	0.32
<i>1991 National elections</i>	
True Path Party	27.03
Motherland Party	24.01
Republican People's Party	20.75
Welfare Party	16.88
Democratic Leftist Party	10.7
Socialist Party	0.44
Others	0.14
<i>1994 Regional elections</i>	
True Path Party	21.44
Motherland Party	21.00
Welfare Party	19.09
Social Democrat Populist Party	13.57
Democratic Leftist Party	8.77
Nationalist Movement Party	7.97
Republican People's Party	4.63
Others	3.53
<i>1995 National elections</i>	
Welfare Party	21.38
Motherland Party	19.65
True Path Party	19.18
Democratic Leftist Party	14.64
Republican People's Party	10.71
Others	14.60

Source: The National Institute of Statistics.

Table 2. The Distribution of the Welfare Party’s Votes in Regions from 1987 to 1995

Regions	1987	1991	1995	Change
Marmara	6.7	15.1	21.7	+15
Aegean	3.7	9.1	11.6	+7.9
Central Anatolia	8.0	24.7	28.1	+20.1
Black Sea	6.5	18.3	20.5	+14.5
Eastern Anatolia	12.6	23.1	30.9	+18.3
Southeast	14.8	16.5	24.3	+9.5
Mediterranean	5.6	14.5	14.9	+9.3

Source: The National Institute of Statistics.

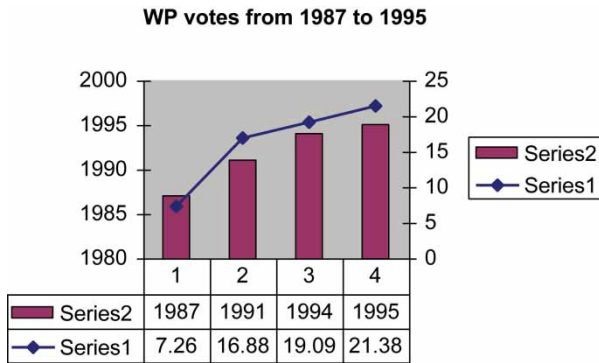


Figure 1. WP Votes from 1987 to 1995.
Source: The National Institute of Statistics.

Anatolia, where the RP increased its votes about 19 percent on average. For these particular regions, as will be discussed soon, the success would be attributed, among other factors, to the RP’s ability to represent the newly-emerged Anatolian middle and upper classes (for central Anatolia), and its ability to emphasize Muslim identity in place of ethnic Turkish identity (for eastern Anatolia where the Turkish–Kurdish conflict was going on). In the remaining districts, the increase was no less than eight percent (Table 2) (Figure 1).

What Caused the Rise of the Welfare Party: Factors and Conditions Increasing the Welfare Party’s Popularity

The dramatic rise of the RP in the 1990s was due to several factors. The majority of these factors were undesirable local conditions. The RP was able to give great hopes to the people and made them believe that the future would be much better. Then, there

were structural conditions helping the RP to increase its powers in the post-coup period. In addition, the party's organizational efficiency was also critical for its success.

The Project of Just Order (Adil Düzen)

In its essence, this project, called by many secularists "tribal socialism," "Soviet-style communism," or "Arab-type socialism," is an eclectic, complex, and utopian (or transformative) approach to the issues of prolonged economic problems and perceived moral erosion in the society. It stresses solidarity, harmony, and justice, strongly appealing to well-established communitarian traditions of Turkish society. It bases politics on the activities of a strong and homogeneous state, an idea well embedded in the political traditions of the Turkish people. But the ideology of a just order does not propagate a simple return to the good old days. It asks that modern technology be used to establish a better society. Prospects of modernity and progress are not foreclosed but presented in a different context. The project was actually developed by a group of people who named themselves "communal Muslims" or "secular Muslims" in the early 1980s in the city of İzmir. It was adopted by the RP in 1985 and quickly became the central program of the party.¹⁰

Although rapid economic development and just distribution of national wealth constitute the main themes, the project is actually composed of a total of four different but interrelated areas. These include politics, economics, science, and religion/morality, in that order. The political part emphasizes the necessity of attaining political power, since such power is believed to be the required vehicle of implementing policies aimed at re-arranging the distribution of national wealth for the better and making other social adjustments. The economic part focuses mainly on the issue of social justice and aims to realize it by eliminating banking interest from the economic sphere. The scientific part refuses all kinds of obstacles to freedom of expression, and encourages the transfer of modern technology and scientific progress wherever they are found. Finally, the religious/morality part proposes to reduce perceived moral erosion in the society by promising to introduce a more spiritual lifestyle based on Islamic principles. Morality is argued to be the basis of the motive for hard work, community services, brotherhood, and thus social peace.¹¹

The just order project, as might be expected, received many criticisms from the secular segments of the society, as well as from many radical religious groups. One such critique pointed to the authoritarian feature of the project on the ground that the project gives much political power to the ruling party to make necessary changes, creating a major contradiction with the essence of democracy. Some other critiques, coming from radical Islamic groups and many members of the RP themselves, stressed the non-Islamic features of the project. The main point of such arguments was that although the project rejected banking interest, it did not reject competitive capitalism, the main cause of inequality and immorality. A true Islamic society is one where nobody can own the means of production and everyone has an obligation to work as much in favor of himself or herself as in favor of the

Muslim community as a whole. But under the conditions of capitalism, mere morality is too weak to control structure-related human selfishness. That is, it is not enough simply to advise people to be moral, responsible, and caring, while structurally pushing them to be competitive and selfish in order to get ahead. Accordingly, the project is neither just nor Islamic. A third criticism of the project came from economists, academics, and intellectuals, in general, who argued that such a project was impossible to implement in a global economic system; thus, it was unrealistic and utopian. In particular, economists underlined the impossibility of eliminating banking interest from the economic sphere, especially in a country where there exist fairly strong relations with the rest of the capitalist world.

Despite such critiques and many of the policy's obvious shortcomings, many personal interviews and much secondary data¹² suggest that by offering perceived cures for socio-economic problems, no matter how unrealistic, the project received a considerable degree of support from a large number of people. This was especially true for the economically disadvantaged. It also happened in a situation in which secular parties failed to produce alternative formulas to meet the expectations of the people.

Emphasis on National Pride

Another factor leading the RP's rise to the largest party in the mid-1990s was its promise to restore the hurt national pride. In his speeches, Erbakan frequently stressed that Turkey had a great potential to be the leader of the Muslim world, as the Ottoman Empire had done for centuries. In Erbakan's view, the only problem was that the secular elite, controlling political power, was insistently trying to integrate with the West, despite many clear rejections by the European Union. To Erbakan, such a policy was not only hard to understand but also insulting for a county that was founded as a successor to a great power, the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, this policy was leading the country to be incompetent, weak, and increasingly dependent on the West.

Accordingly, it was argued that in order for the Turkish nation to rise again, it was necessary to return to Islam. Once this happened, Turkey would lead the Muslim world as well, as it did in the past. In the view of the RP, foreign policy had to be directed to other Muslim nations, and ways of establishing networks and friendly ties with them had to be found. In short, not the West but the Muslim world was the correct area where Turkey could enhance her influence and become a leading country, whereby she could restore her lost honor internationally. In the 1990s, no other party, not even the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP, *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*), which had traditionally been the address of extreme nationalism, represented such popular desire for national recovery and honorable foreign policy.

Ability to Respond to Conflicting Identities and Ethnic Tension

As mentioned earlier, up to the Kemalist period, Islam had been a part of people's everyday life and the main source of social identity. As a matter of fact, during the

Ottoman period, people were defined not as much in terms of their ethnic origin as of their religious affiliation. There were communities like the Muslims, Christians, and Jews that were subject to different laws in their community affairs.¹³

The republican revolution pushed religion out of the public, and to some degree out of the social sphere. In an effort to create a modern nation-state, ethnic Turkish identity was introduced in place of Muslim identity and it was intentionally given great weight in almost every aspect of political and social life.¹⁴ Anyone living within the political boundaries of modern Turkey was declared Turk and expected to accept the tenets of the Kemalist revolution. This is succinctly summed up in the most famous saying of the new republic: How happy is he or she who says, "I am Turkish" (*Ne mutlu Türküm Diyene*).

But for the RP, the purposeful stress on Turkish identity activated ethnic consciousness among different segments of the society who do not identify themselves as Turkish. In this way, an unnecessary ethnic tension and many ethnically based conflicts emerged throughout the country. These were conflicts, which could have been avoided if Muslim identity had not been abandoned. In this respect, the RP also tied the origin of the ongoing Kurdish-Turkish conflict to the policy of overemphasizing ethnic Turkish identity in schools, courts, and the public arena, in general.

Indeed, the RP's rejection of ethnicity and its emphasis on Islam as the supreme social identity received a considerable degree of acceptance from the Kurdish population in eastern Anatolia. The most visible indicator of this was the fact that the party increased its votes from 1987 to 1995 by 18.3 percent in that particular region. At a time when the Kurdish issue persisted and there was visibly less of a chance of achieving an independent or autonomous Kurdish state because of the Turkish state's commitment to preserve the status quo, many ethnic Kurds did not find a better alternative other than the RP's formula.¹⁵

Other Parties' Inability to Produce Solutions to Deepening Problems

The increasing socio-economic problems of Turkey in the 1990s, namely ongoing economic difficulties, corruption, crime and other types of deviant behaviors, as well as demand for more freedom and respect for human rights, led some people to search for rapid and radical solutions. According to many observers,¹⁶ such demands failed to be addressed effectively by right wing and leftist parties alike. For instance, the center-right True Path Party (DYP, *Doğru Yol Partisi*) inherited the legendary successes of the DP and AP, but was unable to produce new policies to cope with contemporary problems. Likewise, the Motherland Party (ANAP, *Anavatan Partisi*), another major center-right party, lost its reformist features after Turgut Özal, its founder, left it for the presidency, becoming a supporter of the status quo. The major leftist parties, the CHP and Democratic Leftist Party (DSP, *Demokratik Sol Parti*), were still framing their party programs in accordance with the 70-year old Kemalist principles and had been largely unsuccessful in understanding, and coping effectively with, contemporary issues. Consequently, many voters began to search for an alternative political party that had not been tried before and that

could meet their expectations. Out of this search, the RP, with its growing power and convincing promises, emerged as a major alternative and became the best representative of the demand for a rapid and radical change for the better in the mid-1990s.

Effective Organization

In the early 1990s, the RP created a very effective organization network to reach the voters that other parties failed to. The system was called *tesbih* (string) and was based on a labor-intensive organic relationship between the party and its voters. Many members of the RP explained the dynamism of their party's organization on the basis of the RP's perceived disadvantaged position in comparison with other parties in a secular system. During an interview on December 15 1993, current prime minister of Turkey, Recep T. Erdoğan, a former member of the RP, elaborated the point as follows:

Other parties (referring to secular parties) have already gained a great support of the media and facilities of the political system, as they are part of it. These are against us. To overcome this disadvantage, we must work much harder than any other party and that is what we are doing. Our party works like a center nervous system. A new member immediately becomes an activist and tries to make others join the movement. On this ground, we constitute an organic wholeness.¹⁷

As a matter of fact, the RP worked hard and entered elections with a huge propaganda crew. The crew was composed of the following organs and elements.¹⁸

- *Village and neighborhood representatives:* The RP center in Ankara appointed a party representative and a vice-representative to every village and neighborhood. About 160,000 such representatives were active in over 80,000 villages and neighborhoods throughout the country. Their duty was to increase the support of the party via- home-to-home visits. During such visits, gifts and economic aid were also generously given to be "more convincing."
- *Teachers and propagators:* Such people were given the duty of propagating the project of just order and other party programs in informal public places where people are commonly present, such as coffee houses, parks, restaurants, and so on. Their number as of 1994 was over 10,000.
- *Party governors:* Just before elections, about 50,000 city, county, and town governors, who were members of the RP, were mobilized to propagate party programs in their districts.
- *Army of volunteers:* This group was composed of a large number of volunteers, some of who were economically powerful Turkish-European immigrants. About 200,000 such people were responsible for propagating the RP in their neighborhoods and public places. They were particularly active before elections.

- *Army of mujahids*: In addition, the RP appointed a group of about 100,000 people as *mujahids* (holy warriors). The duty of these people was to participate in elections as observers and information collectors. On election days, they would supervise, as far as possible, every detail of voting, gather statistical data with respect to the RP and other parties, and report them immediately to the party center.

In the early 1990s, to sum up, it would perhaps be true to argue that no other party managed to organize itself as effectively as the RP. Organizational effectiveness created new opportunities for the RP to propagate itself among large segments of the society and thus enhance its support bases. To some observers,¹⁹ this organizational success played a major role in transforming the RP from a marginal party of a small number of radical Muslims into a mass party.

Domestic Political Atmosphere after the 1980 Military Coup: The Manipulation of Religion by the State

Finally, the 1980 military coup and following events also helped the RP to rise. Turkey was confronted by recurrent political violence throughout the 1970s, which was the work of small but well organized extreme rightist and leftist groups. Some political parties, especially those of the extreme right, organized strong-arm auxiliaries to carry their case into the streets. Most of the violence-prone groups of the right were apparently attached, directly or indirectly, to Alparslan Türkeş's MHP. The best organized of these, the Gray Wolves, were armed and repeatedly resorted to terrorist tactics. Other groups on the left used violence in the hope that the reaction of the state would polarize the country and lead to a revolution. They frequently assaulted politicians, public officials, the police, and members of rival groups. The US service personnel stationed in Turkey, who were perceived as symbols of American imperialism, were also targets for attacks.²⁰

The September 12, 1980 military coup, headed by General Kenan Evren, took place as a response to this political turmoil in the country. There was no organized resistance to the coup, and indeed, many Turks welcomed it as the only alternative to anarchy. With severe punishments and many executions, the coup succeeded in suppressing the radical left and right in a relatively short period of time, roughly in two years. This climate created an opportunity for political Islam to grow as an alternative ideology. In fact, many leftists and rightist who no longer could continue their politics in their political arena leaned towards Islam with the hope of continuing their struggle. Thus, Islam became the new harbor of many radical leftist and rightist groups from the early 1980s on.

On the other hand, in the post coup period, the state, still controlled by the military, needed a moderate ideology that would guarantee social peace and not constitute a new threat to itself. Although radical left and right were severely restricted, their support bases were still present in the society. In order to avoid social explosions, a unifying ideology was sought and that ideology turned out to be Islam, as Islam

had been a major source of social solidarity for the vast majority of Turkish people for centuries.²¹

The process of Islamization became even more evident with the ANAP government that came to power in the post-coup period in 1983. This party's concern for gaining *tarikats* votes led it to extend ever-increasing tolerance to religious figures and groups. The leader of ANAP, Turgut Özal, a member of the Nakşibendi *tarikats*, maintained good relations with major religious sects.²² On the other hand, ANAP's policies of political liberalism and social compromise, which aimed to realize peaceful co-existence of different ideologies, created a "soft" climate where political Islam would flourish.

By the late 1980s, all these events resulted in two developments. First, Islamic groups and organizations were securely established, becoming more independent and critical of the secular state. Some radical Islamists increased their voice and began to demand Sharia publicly. Others, more moderate, started criticizing the Kemalist ideology, and many declared it suppressive and anti-democratic. A few militant Islamic groups, such as Hezbollah and IBDA-C, resorted to acts of violence in an attempt to demand the imposition of Islamic law.

The second development was that with Turgut Özal's leaving his party for the presidency in 1989, ANAP lost its character of being the most popular representative of *tarikats* and other religious elements. Özal's successor, Mesut Yılmaz, on the other hand, had little or no sympathy with religious establishments and displayed a far more distant attitude towards them. As a result, ANAP continued to be a liberal, right wing party but dropped its pro-Islamist aspect. At the same time, political Islam became stronger and once again turned out to be an independent movement that could no longer exist in a center-right party embracing other ideologies. Hence, after the late 1980s, the RP, whose ideology was tied directly with Islam, became almost the only address of religious votes and the growing Islamic movement.

Overall, the popular Islamization policy of the 1980s was based on the military's false calculation that Islam was only a religion of morality, that if people became good Muslims, they would be less likely to be troublemakers for the state. The political dimension of Islam was mistakenly neglected. Nor was it foreseen that Islam would grow so rapidly that it could become a major challenge to the republican ideology. But with contributions of the increasingly tolerant attitudes of the state, the unexpected happened. Islamization went beyond its original intention and turned into a radical political movement independent and critical of its creators in the 1990s.²³

The Banning Process of the Welfare Party and Afterwards

After the 1995 parliamentary elections, which established the RP as the largest political party, the first government coming into office was the *Anayol* coalition government, set up between ANAP and DYP, the second and third largest parties, respectively. However, this government did not last long due to many disagreements between the partners over various domestic and foreign issues. One year later, in

1996, the DYP was, in a way, forced to enter partnership with the RP, of which it had been critical, in the absence of a better alternative. Hence, the second coalition government, named *Refahyol*, was established. As the leader of the larger partner of the government, Erbakan was appointed Prime Minister by President Süleyman Demirel.

With the RP coming to power, two types of development quickly led to a political tension that resulted in the banning of the party two years later. The first was extreme distrust regarding the RP. From the very beginning, the military, secular politicians and public, as well as most of the non-Islamic media, had a hard time accepting an Islamic party's holding political power in a secular order, and thus they became rather critical of the RP policies.²⁴ The inability to digest the RP existence in the government and resulting suspicions manifested themselves in many ways. Perhaps the most evident manifestation was that even though the RP was the larger partner in the government, almost all key departments were given to the DYP members. Likewise, only Erbakan was allowed to participate in the monthly meetings of the National Security Council, an extremely important constitutional institution in which significant security decisions are made in collaboration with the military.

The second type of event intensifying the Islamist-secularist split was related to radical Islamists and the RP itself. While the lack of confidence put the RP in a disadvantaged position from the beginning, some policies of the party and many undesirable attitudes of its members further exacerbated the tension between the Islamist and secular segments of the society. For instance, during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan (in January 1997), the RP government openly advocated building mosques on Istanbul's Taksim Square and in Ankara's Çankaya district, which both have certain republican associations, the one decorated with an Atatürk monument commemorating the war of independence, the other the official residential area of the republic's president.²⁵ Erbakan's closest aides, such as Şevket Kazan and Oğuzhan Asiltürk, advocated lifting the ban on wearing headscarves in public buildings. They also wanted to change working hours during Ramadan to bring them more into line with religious requirements and were in favor of loosening the control of the Directorate of Religious Affairs over the organization of the pilgrimage by allowing overland travel to Mecca.²⁶ Likewise, several the RP parliament members and mayors made public speeches discrediting Kemalist ideology and secularism. Many others showed their feelings by not rising when the national anthem was being read.

On the other hand, Erbakan himself behaved provocatively at times. One of his most daring actions was to hold a Ramadan banquet at the Prime Minister's residence, bringing together *tarikats* leaders, the head of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, and leading professors from the theology faculties to dine at the break of fast, *iftar*. At one level, the television pictures of turbaned sheikhs attending a meal in the Prime Minister's house were a visual nightmare for committed secularists. More profoundly, it reflected a potential redistribution of power whereby Islamic forces, both within and outside the state, combined openly against avowedly secularist groups. Further, Erbakan's series of visits to Muslim Arab countries led to the

impression that he was seeking outside ideological support to strengthen his domestic position and that the secular future of the country was in danger.

Under this climate, many unusual events that came into existence shortly after the establishment of the *Refahyol* government indicated that the situation was not normal. For instance, on September 30, 1996, the Center for Crisis Administration was established. The idea came from the military that had been particularly suspicious of the RP.²⁷ The objectives of the center were said to be to prevent and eliminate events causing crises quickly in accord with national interests.²⁸ Here, the implicit reference was made to pro-Islamic events, perceived as crisis production. Even though the center was ostensibly responsible to the prime minister, it was set up within the military and top military staff determined its policies.²⁹

In addition, on January 30, 1997, Prime Minister Erbakan was forced to give additional authority to the Secretary General of the National Security Council, whereby the Secretary General was authorized to oversee and evaluate whether public institutions were working in accordance with republican principles, including secularism. For this purpose, the Secretary General could go anywhere and report his observations to the National Security Council.³⁰ Such a measure was taken in response to the rumor that some public institutions were filled with radical Islamists, who were vigorously working to transform the republic into an Islamic state. Erbakan, of course, did not enjoy the measure, since it limited his authority and, indeed, confirmed reservations with respect to his party. Nonetheless, he did not explicitly show any negative reaction in order to display his willingness to cooperate and prevent a possible premature conflict with the military.

Additionally, with the RP's coming to power, a group of top military staff informally formed a group, named the West Working Group (*Batı Çalışma Grubu*), to follow the actions of the Islamists, in general, and the RP, in particular. The group carefully watched the RP members, the *tarikats*, Islamic associations, pro-Islamic TV channels and radio stations, student movements, and other elements of Islamic movement, periodically briefing the National Security Council as well.³¹ In fact, rumors spread that this group was preparing for a military coup to overthrow the government.

These measures demonstrate the politically disadvantaged position of RP from the beginning, but it was a series of decisions made by the National Security Council on February 28, 1997 that would lead to the ending of the RP government and the banning of the party by the Constitutional Court. The February 28 decisions included many measures perceived as necessary to guarantee the secular order and prevent a future violent Islamic uprising. Prime Minister Erbakan was forced to accept the decisions despite his personal disagreements, and this was, indeed, the unofficial declaration of the end of his authority.

After the February 28 decisions, the military increased its pressure on the Islamic threat all the more and in this respect, the RP was regarded as the major political organ of that threat. It was under this climate that the RP was formally accused in May of 1997 by the attorney general of anti-secular political activities and of the encouragement of radical Islam, aimed at destroying the republic in favor of a

Sharia state. The case was sent to the Constitutional Court in the same month. The Constitutional Court gave its decision on January 16, 1998 and banned the RP permanently on the ground that the party was taking actions against the secular order.

Shortly after the ban, the RP was succeeded by another party, the Virtue Party (FP, *Fazilet Partisi*) in 1998. Yet the new party could not escape the same fate and was closed on June 22, 2001, for the same claim. This final ban, which was largely unexpected for most pro-Islamists, led to a split in the popular support of legal political Islam and gave birth to two political parties, the Happiness Party (SP, *Saadet Partisi*), which follows the orthodox ideology of the RP, and the Justice and Development Party (AK Party, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*), which represents a more moderate and inclusive understanding of Islam.³²

The AK Party won a sweeping victory in the 2002 national elections, becoming the first Turkish party in 11 years to win an outright majority. The leader of the party, Recep T. Erdoğan normally would have become prime minister, but was banned from holding any political office after a 1994 incident in which he read a poem deemed pro-Islamist by judges. As a result, Abdullah Gül, a close friend of Erdoğan, became prime minister. Later, Erdoğan's ban was abolished and he became prime minister in March 2003. The AK Party once again won 2007 national elections with 46.6 percent of the vote, translating into control of 341 of the 550 available parliamentary seats.

After the party's attempt to lift the headscarf ban, the Chief Public Prosecutor of the Supreme Court of Appeals formally asked the Constitutional Court to close the party in March 2008. In addition, the prosecutor demanded a five-year ban from involvement in politics for 71 senior AK Party administrators, including Erdoğan and President Gül. However, the court rejected most of the demands of the prosecutor and did not ban the party, but it halved its public funding as a penalty. At present, the AK Party still remains politically very strong.³³

Conclusion: Lessons Learned and the Prospect

In examining the rise of political Islam in Turkey based on the case of the Welfare Party, several lessons can be drawn, summarized as follows:

Some aspects of political Islam are rooted in traditions of the Turkish society, shaped by religion for centuries. While Kemalist reforms intended to create a secular state and society, the cultural significance of Islam remained strong at the societal level. That base gave rise to political Islam in the years to come as democracy progressed and more important, when the military supported Islamic ideology to defuse leftist threats in the 1980s.

Some aspects of political Islam are also tied to literal interpretations of Quran and other sources of Islam in that many Muslims believe that they are rightfully entitled to have an Islamic state because Islam does not separate politics from everyday life. To these, a small minority, to be sure, an Islamic order cannot be brought about through piecemeal reforms only; thus, state power must be seized, forcibly if needed, to implement the "true" vision of Islam. Accordingly, they resort to violence either

defensively or offensively. Dealing with this “blind” side of Islamic extremism will be extremely difficult. Better intelligence and effective use of security forces may reduce the likelihood of immediate threat.

But the study also reveals that militant Islamists of this kind do not constitute a large number in the whole movement of political Islam. The appeal of mainstream political Islam has more to do with undesirable domestic conditions, particularly, economic distress, unjust distribution of national wealth, real or perceived lack of freedom, state suppression, corruption, and so on. In a situation where secular parties failed to produce effective solutions to these problems, political Islam became a major alternative. Thus, further democracy and better living conditions should be the area towards which positive actions should be directed if the Islamic challenge in Turkey, as elsewhere, is to be successfully managed.

As for the prospect, it is likely that the Turkish society will continue to experience the Islamists-secularists conflict in the future. And perhaps neither side will win this conflict. Both sides will eventually learn to live side by side. In this process, both radical Islamists and militant secularists will likely to become less powerful. It is already evident, with eight years of AK Party government, that mass support is only possible if a political activity is moderate, inclusive, and sensitive to the demands of public regardless of its ideological origin.

Notes

1. At times, the Empire was governed by a body of traditional law (*orfi hukuk*), which did not necessarily derive from religious law (the Sharia) and which was developed by the Ottoman rulers as a necessity to hold a multi-ethnic and multi-religious empire. Nevertheless, care was always taken not to openly violate religious law.
2. Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (Canada: McGill University Press, 1964); Sukru M. Hanioglu, *The Young Turks in Opposition* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
3. Adil Ozdemir and Frank Kenneth, *Visible Islam in Modern Turkey* (London: McMillan Press, 2000), pp. 17–18.
4. Niyazi Berkes (1964), pp. 461–79.
5. Mustafa Kemal died in 1938 but his successor, Ismet Inonu, continued his policy until he lost the national elections in 1950.
6. Feroz Ahmad, *The Turkish Experiment in Democracy, 1950–1975* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1977).
7. Paul M. Pitman, *Turkey: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1988), pp. 55–8.
8. Binnaz Toprak, *Islam and Political Development in Turkey* (Leiden: Brill, 1981).
9. Source: *Devlet Istatistik Enstitüsü yayinlari* (The National Institute of Statistics), Ankara, Turkey. Also visit, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/639262/Welfare-Party> (February 1, 2011).
10. Yalcin Akdogan, *Siyasal Islam (Political Islam)* (Istanbul: Sehir Yayinlari, 2000).
11. Necmettin Erbakan, *Adil Ekonomik Duzen (Just Economic Order)* (Ankara, 1991).
12. See, for example, David Shankland, *Islam and Society in Turkey* (Cambridge: The Eothen Press, 1999), pp. 103–4; Heinz A. Kramer, *A Changing Turkey: The Challenge to Europe and the United States* (Washington, DC: Brooking Institution Press, 2000), pp. 78–9.
13. Patrick B. Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries: The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Empire* (New York: Morrow, 1979).

14. David Shankland (1999), pp. 21–2.
15. For further information, visit <http://countrystudies.us/turkey/83.htm> (February 7, 2011).
16. See, for example, Heinz A. Kramer (2000), p. 79.
17. Interview with Recep T. Erdogan, *The Publication of the Welfare Party Istanbul City Organization*, No. 3, December 15, 1993.
18. Information presented here is based on interviews with former Welfare Party staff and other relevant individuals, as well as various previous researches. The figures may not be completely accurate, however, as they reflect more common beliefs than statistical data.
19. See, for example, David Shankland (1999), pp. 104–6.
20. Paul M. Pitman, *Turkey: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1988), pp. 79–81.
21. Umit C. Sakallioğlu, “Parameters and Strategy of Islam-State Interaction in the Republic of Turkey,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (1996), p. 247.
22. Adil Ozdemir and Frank Kenneth (2000), p. 70.
23. Muzaffer E. Yilmaz, *Religious Revivalism in the Social Identity Context* (Fairfax, VA: Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, George Mason University, 2002), pp. 78–82.
24. David Shankland (1999), pp. 110–2; Heinz A. Kramer (2000), pp. 73–8.
25. Ayla Ganioglu, “RP at a Crossroads,” *Turkish Daily News*, February 1, 1997.
26. Carol Migdalovitz, *Turkey’s Unfolding Political Crisis* (CRS report 97–462, Congressional Research Service, April 11, 1997).
27. Heinz A. Kramer (2000), pp. 73–4.
28. *Hurriyet*, October 1, 1996; *Cumhuriyet*, October 1, 1996.
29. Heinz A. Kramer (2000), p. 74.
30. *Hurriyet*, January 31, 1997.
31. Metehan Demir, “Military Watchdog Group Monitors Spreading Fundamentalism,” *Turkish Daily News*, June 14, 1997.
32. Umit Cizre, *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of the Justice and Development Party* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).
33. Hakan M. Yavuz, *Secularism and Muslim Democracy in Turkey* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

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