

# Prospects For Democracy and Market Economy in Turkey\*

Atilla YAYLA\*\*

## A Short Story of the Near Past

The last decade has witnessed the rise of pro-Islamic Welfare Party (WP) in Turkey. After a steady progress it won municipal elections in the two biggest cities of the country, İstanbul and Ankara, in the 1994 general local elections. A year later, it came out as the biggest political party from the 1995 general parliamentary elections. Its electoral share went up from 4.4 percent in 1984 to 21.38 percent in 1995. Though with a narrow margin, 21.38 percent made it the country's largest political party. However it was the WP's participation in the coalition government with True Path Party that drew a lot of attention both at home and abroad. In Turkey many people started pondering whether the fragile Turkish democracy could afford to have a pro-Islamic party in power. In the west many commentators found this development very dangerous for both Turkey and the West. They were quite surprised that it could happen in a country which has long been considered as the bastion of secularism in the Islamic world, and a close ally of the West. There were some others who seemed delighted. One of them, the former Iranian ambassador to Ankara, showed

up in the WP sponsored "Jerusalem Night" in early February 1997, and stated that the sovereignty of Sharia in Islamic countries was inevitable, it could come through revolution, as in Iran, or democratically, as in Turkey.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the domestic and outside reactions, the truth is this: The WP has become a major player in Turkish politics and it seems that it will keep this position for the foreseeable future.

## The Factors Contributing to the Growth of the WP

The factors that have been effective in the WP's growth fall into two groups. The first group includes those factors that are directly related to, or under the control of, the WP itself. Among these are a transcendental cause, an excellent party organization, strong financial sources, very sophisticated and unique political propaganda techniques, and unmatched motivations for party men and women.

However, in my opinion, the factors in the second group have been more functional in the WP's rise. I can briefly mention four of them. First comes the religious revival in the country. Religious revival can be best observed in the universities. Ten years ago there were very few religious university students. Today, they

---

\* Doç. Dr., Hacettepe University

outnumber any other groups including socialists who dominated Turkish universities from the late 1960s to early 1990s.

The second factor in this group is Turkey's practice of secularism. Ironically, Turkey's adventure of secularism has contributed a lot to the religious revival and thus to the WP. There is no doubt that secularism in the universal sense is an indispensable prerequisite for liberal democracy. Yet, Turkey's secularism remains highly questionable in this respect. One of the meanings of secularism is religious freedom. This requires the state to be impartial against all religions or different interpretations of the same religion. Unfortunately, in the single-party regime Turkey took secularism as, not religious freedom, but, freedom from religion. The governing elite sought to purge Islam from social life through a political modernization program carried out by the state. This program brought the religious establishment and ordinary people under immense pressure.<sup>2</sup> After the regime was transformed into democracy in 1950, the pressure started lessening but never disappeared completely. Human rights violations committed against the religious people have been the most useful political leverage in the hand of the WP.

Thirdly, widespread corruption in other major political parties and growing public discontent with the system have contributed most to the growth of the WP. Corruption is visible on every level, from ordinary state offices to the courts. Bribery is an ordinary fact of the day to day life. The judicial system is not able to reverse human right violations or to proceed with corruption investigations. One may wonder if the rule of law really exists in country. In such an environment the WP has a natural opportunity to present itself as the only uncorrupt political entity and the only way out from corruption, inefficiency, and hopelessness.

The fourth and last factor in the second group is the identity loss in the center right. That identity loss helped the WP so much that it is about to remove the center-right political parties from their longstanding positions. The Democrat Party, the first center-right party of Turkish democracy, had risen on issues of human rights, political participation and open economy. In time, for a number of reasons, the center-right has been transformed from being a liberal democratic movement into a statist, collectivist, partly authoritarian political movement.<sup>3</sup> This created a vacuum in the political spectrum from which the WP is generously benefiting. Numerically speaking, since 1983 the center-right has lost 22 percent, and the WP raised its electoral share, together with the National Action Party, again, almost 22 percent. It seems that, the center-right is donating "blood" to the WP.<sup>4</sup>

#### **The Basic Views of the WP**

The WP offers an "alternative" system called "Just Order". Just order has two main components: Just economic order and legal pluralism.

Party ideologues present just economic order as the third way between capitalism and communism. They say it is superior to capitalism and communism because it retains their best sides while setting aside their wrong and harmful aspects. Just economic order differs from market economy in many respects. It depends on the principle of absolute harmony of economic interest among Muslim brothers. Current conflicts of economic interest are seen as the products of the imperialist "Western powers" intervention. Not surprisingly, just economic order gives the state the right and the duty to manipulate all economic activities. The state becomes a partner in every economic enterprise through planning, financing, and taxing. Just economic order denies the scarcity of economic sources, especially of

capital. Despite paying lip service to private property and free entrepreneurship, when taken to its logical extensions, it leaves no room for them. Currency, too, cannot escape from just economic order; it is distorted, and a coupon system is installed to take over some basic functions of money. Unfortunately, this is not all, and the rest is worse. In just economic order individual consumption becomes related to the individual contribution to the general production. And economic entrepreneurship becomes dependent on the moral permission to be given by local moral clubs which will operate under the control of the state.<sup>5</sup>

Just economic order has two obvious characteristics. First, it is a totalitarian project that leaves no room for basic economic freedoms and market economy, Second, it has no capacity of application since it is completely imaginary and has no linkage to the realities of human nature and foundations of economic life.<sup>6</sup>

The second part of just order envisages a kind of legal pluralism. According to this there is going to be more than one legal system at the same time in the same country, and citizens will freely pick one of them. This theory is based on the "Medina document", the agreement between Jews and Prophet Muhammad to live in the same city according to the rules of their respective religions. Its defenders say that legal pluralism can enlarge the scope of individual freedom and thus create a more advanced form of democracy. I think the theory of legal pluralism fails to see that the content of contemporary law has not been fully determined by any single religion but by the common experience of humanity in all its richness. Legal pluralism may free individuals from having to obey to the rules of the religion they do not belong to, but the problem of liberty may also appear within the same belief group.

### **Islam, Market Economy, and Democracy**

The rise of the WP raised, once again, the basic question of whether Islam is compatible with liberal democracy and market economy. Two approaches are taken in response to this question.<sup>7</sup>

1- Some Muslim authors completely reject the notion of democracy and are market economy, believing that free market economy and liberal democracy belong to, and products of, another civilization, namely Western civilization.

2- Some Muslim writers do not categorically reject liberal democracy and market economy, instead they attempt to discover the roots of democracy and market economy in Islamic sources and history of Islam.

The first is a kind of reductionism that I call "one-dimensional-approach". This approach rejects, at least heavily ignores, all other elements of human life like law, moral, science, philosophy and ideology, in favor of religion and tries to construct and to explain all human life in terms of religion. The best example of this approach is the socialist experiment of the twentieth century. As we all know, socialists rejected and suppressed religion, law, moral, philosophy and science in favor of their Marxist ideology and this paved the way toward the most disastrous totalitarian regimes in history. Those who abandon all other social institutions for the sake of their self-styled interpretations of Islam are also bound to give way to new totalitarian experiments. However, it would be unfair to pass without mentioning the other and twin form of this understanding. It appears in the form of denying Islam any meaningful and important place in society usually on behalf of a misunderstood science or secularism. I think this is the way radical secularist have been stubbornly following in Turkey.

The second approach is more comforting. Indeed one can find some elements in Islamic sources that seem to have the capacity to support free market economy and democracy. I will briefly mention some of them: A respect for private property and inheritance; a determination to protect legitimate trade agreements; a strong social morality. All these are essential for a market economy. It seems that the biggest problem in respect to Islam's relation with a market economy is the institution of interest. Even on this subject a way out seems to exist. There are some Islamic jurists who think that what is forbidden in Islam is not interest but usury (riba).<sup>8</sup>

With respect to politics and law, one can refer to those points in Islam: The acceptance of human beings as valuable and honorable creatures, the sovereign's duty to be just against the governed, the institution of consultation (shura), the consensus of the governed (ijma); the understanding of law as a discovery process, the equality of human beings before law, and the authority of jurists for independent and individual reasoning. These are sufficient to say that Islam may be more compatible with democracy and rule of law than many people suppose.<sup>9</sup>

However, we must not extend this approach to the extent where Islam becomes identical or the same with market economy and liberal democracy. In my opinion, it is futile to hope to discover the roots of democracy and market economy a hundred percent in any religion, be it Christianity or Islam. Otherwise, despite starting from a very different point, we may reach the same result with a one-dimensional approach. I believe that religion is a very important aspect of human life. It may influence economic, political and legal systems to a certain degree and the amount of this influence depends on various conditions. Yet, no single religion can shape all aspects of human life. Therefore, it is meaningless to speak of a

purely-religiously-formed economic, political or legal system.

### Islam and Islamism in Turkey

Islam is not a phenomenon of today or yesterday in Turkey. It has been a part of Turkey's sociological reality. There is nothing unusual or frightening in this. Islam has also played an important role in Turkish politics since the very early days of the Republic.<sup>10</sup> However, by acknowledging Islam's permanent place in Turkish politics, I do not assume that there can be no threat to democracy deriving from Islamist movements. There is an actual, real threat. In order to better understand the range and nature of this threat we need to make a distinction between traditional and political Islamists.

Traditional Islamists are usually devoted, humble Muslims who want their Muslim fellows to follow Islamic values more strictly. They do not like politics much and their interest and involvement in politics usually derive from the legitimate goal of protecting themselves against the harm unlimited politics can do to them. They believe that Islam should not be politicized. It is not politics, it is above politics.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, traditional Islamists are not seeking to capture the state and to "Islamize" the Muslim society through a comprehensive, stated political program.

Political Islamists see things differently. They take Islam as a self-sufficient, full-fledged economic and political system. The way they treat Islam turns it into a total, collectivist, hard ideology. Political Islamists are passionate social engineers, hungry collectivist revolutionaries. They desire to establish a so-called "Islamic state" to reshape the society from top to the bottom. It is not all Islamist groups, but only these Islamist groups that pose a real threat to Turkish democracy. To the surprise of many foreign observers and students of Turkish politics, one of the biggest

obstacles before political Islamists is traditional Islamist groups. What we can conclude from this fact is this: The danger for Turkish democracy is not Islam. The danger is radical utopianism and collectivist revolutionarism that appeared in Turkey in the 1970s and 1980s in the form of socialist movements and now are appearing in the form of political Islamism.

### Conclusion

Between July 1996 and July 1997, for the first time in the history of Turkish Republic and Turkish democracy, a pro-Islamic political party was the leading partner in a coalition government and its leader was the prime minister of the secular Republic. The Turkish democracy is at a very interesting phase now. What is to happen will depend on not only the attitude of the WP but also the attitude of some other forces in the country. It is time to act rationally and cautiously. By looking at the most emotionally charged issues raised in the past few months by the WP we cannot say that democracy and secularism are about to disappear.<sup>12</sup> We must, surely, take the claim that the WP wants to hijack democracy; it is not prepared to work within the system and to recognize the rules of the democratic system very seriously. But, how can we be sure of this without giving it a chance to discredit itself? We have a right to ask the WP to stay within the limits of democracy. But we also have a duty to warn those groups who hate the WP and see secularism as more important than democracy not to provoke the army to intervene in Turkish politics on their behalf. Military interference is not something that could strengthen Turkish democracy.

### NOTLAR

1. *Sabah* (İstanbul), February 2, 1997.
2. Ahmet Arslan, "Türk Laikliği ve Geleceği Üzerine Bazı Düşünceler", *Liberal Düşünce*,

Winter 1996, pp. 54-76.

3. Kâzım Berzeg, *Liberalizm ve Türkiye*, Ankara; Liberal Düşünce Topluluğu, 1996, pp. 177-183.

4. Atilla Yayla and Melih Yürüşen, *Yerle-şik Siyasi Partiler Araştırması*, Ankara: Konrad Adenauer Vakfı, 1996, p. 33.

5. Necmettin Erbakan, *Adil Ekonomik Dü-zen*, Ankara, 1991.

6. Atilla Yayla and Melih Yürüşen, *Refah Partisi Üzerine Bir Araştırma*, Ankara: Konrad Adenauer Vakfı, 1996, pp. 41-44.

7. See John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality* (second edition), Oxford University Press, 1995.

8. Mustafa Erdoğan, "İslam ve Liberalizm: Kısa Bir Bakış", *Liberal Düşünce*, Autumn 1996, pp. 11-18.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Andrew Mango, "The Turkish Model", *Middle Eastern Studies*, October 1993, pp. 740-2.

11. Şahin Alpay, "Fethullah Hoca'nın Sof-rası", *Milliyet* (İstanbul), November 21, 1996.

12. The most controversial issues of domestic politics raised by the WP during its time in office are these: To abolish the ban upon women's covering their head in universities and public offices, to reschedule work hours in public offices to allow male officials to participate in the Friday prayer if they wish to, to allow Muslims to dispose of their qurban's (sacrificed animal) skin freely and to construct symbolically important mosques in Ankara and İstanbul.

\* Paper presented in the Middle East Young Leadership Conference organized by F. Naumann Foundation between 20-23 October 1997 in Brussels, Belgium.