

Ismail Cem's life

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Ismail Cem, a former Turkish foreign minister, who together with his Greek counterpart was the driving force behind the thawing relations between the two archrivals, has died of lung cancer, last wendnesday (24-01-2006). He was buried yesterday in Istanbul.

Cem served as foreign minister under three successive governments between 1997 and 2003, becoming the longest serving Turkish foreign minister in recent years. His greatest achievement was forging close ties with Greece, largely due to his personal friendship with Greece's former Foreign Minister George Papandreou.

Cem finished high school at Robert College in Istanbul in 1959 and graduated from law school at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland in 1963. In 1983 he earned a master's degree in the sociology of politics at the Ecole Libre des Sciences Politiques in Paris, France.

He started his professional career as a journalist in 1963 working for some leading newspapers and later became editor in chief of Milliyet. Between 1971 and 1974, he served as the Istanbul office head of the Turkish Newspaper Workers Union.

Making his mark at TRT

In 1974-1975, he acted as general director of state broadcaster the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT). He brought numerous innovations to TRT and increased broadcasts from the then 20 hours to 50 hours a week.

Although Cem's improvements and appointments drew strong reactions from opponents, he doubled TRT's audience from 10 million to 20 million people.

In 1975 Nevzat Yalcintas took over the post from Cem. The Council of State wanted Cem to return to office, but he had chosen to return to journalism.

Political career

He entered politics after being elected an Istanbul deputy in the 1987 general elections. He announced his running for the leadership of the Social Democrat People's Party (SHP) in 1988 but wasn't elected.

Cem, supporting the left wing, made considerable contributions to the re-establishment of the Republican People's Party (CHP) in 1992, after over a decade off the political scene in the wake of the 1980 coup.

He was reelected in 1991 again representing Istanbul, and in 1995 for Kayseri.

After the death of President Turgut Ozal in 1993, he ran for president against Suleyman Demirel, Kamran Inan and Lutfi Dogan, without success.

In 1995, he served as culture minister within Tansu Ciller's government and left the CHP to join the Democratic Left Party (DSP).

He became a board member of the DSP's parliamentary group in 1996. He was elected as a member to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) and Assembly of the West European Union. He served as vice chair of the socialist group of PACE as well as chair of the Turkish delegation to PACE and WEU Assembly.

Contributions to Turkish-Greek relations

Cem served as foreign minister from June 30, 1997 until July 10, 2002. He was the country's fourth longest-serving minister in this position.

1999 was a key year for Cem, as he managed to negotiate candidate status for Turkey's bid to join the European Union. But just as importantly, it was the year that Turkey broke the ice with Greece after years of hostility that had often threatened to assume a military form. In a famous scene that made headlines in both countries, Cem and his Greek counterpart George Papandreou joined in Greek dancing and singing on the Greek island of Samos.

He was honored with the Best Statesman of the Year 2000 award together with Papandreou for fostering closer relations between the two nations.

After a dispute with party leader Bulent Ecevit, he resigned from the DSP ahead of the 2002 parliamentary elections and formed the New Turkey Party (YTP) in July 2002 together with former party colleagues Husamettin Ozkan and Kemal Dervis. Ismail Cem was elected leader of the YTP, which did not do well in the elections.

Returning from the U.S., where he had gone for cancer treatment, he closed the YTP on Oct. 24, 2004 and rejoined the CHP. Cem acted as chief advisor to Deniz Baykal, the leader of the CHP, and lectured in Turkish applied foreign policy at Istanbul's Bilgi University until he passed away in Istanbul as a result of lung cancer.

Politician, photographer and writer

He managed to combine his career in politics with work as a photographer, with several exhibitions to his name, and as a writer.

His books include "Turkiye'de Geri Kalmisligin Tarihi" (History of Turkish Underperformance), "Turkiye Uzerine Yazilar" (Notes on Turkey), "12 Mart" (March 12), "TRT'de 500 Gun" (500 Days at TRT), "Siyaset Yazilari" (Notes on Politics), "Gecis Donemi Turkiye'si" (Turkey's Times of Transition), "Sosyal Demokrasi ya da Demokratik Sosyalizm Nedir, Ne Degildir?" (What is Social Democracy or Democratic Socialism, and What Isn't?), "Turkiye'de Sosyal Demokrasi" (Social Democracy in Turkey), Engeller ve Cozumler (Obstacles and Solutions), "Yeni Sol" (The New Left), "Sol'daki Arayis" (The Search on the Left), "Gelecek Icin Denemeler" (Attempts for the Future), "Mevsim" (Season), and "21. Yuzyilda Turkiye" (Turkey in the 21st century).