

Religion and politics in the Turkish political arena

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The political profile reflecting the “Milli Görüş” or “National View” movement, as represented by the National Order Party (MNP), the National Salvation Party (MSP), the Welfare Party (RP), the Virtue Party (FP) and finally the Felicity Party (SP), is most likely on the verge of giving birth to a second pro-freedom conservative democratic movement.

I do not think that this interesting situation has as yet attracted the analysis and debate that it deserves. In order, however, to understand Turkish politics and the changes occurring in society, one must take the time to closely examine these developments and their underlying causes and motivations. This, then, is the aim of my modest column. Before entering into the body of my article, however, I would like to clarify that I took much inspiration and many ideas from my dear teacher, Ergun Özbudun, and William Hale's book, “Islamism, Democracy, and Liberalism in Turkey.”

The fact that the SP, under the leadership of Numan Kurtulmuş, staked out a place on the “yes” front of the recent referendum was in fact a cause for some serious concern amongst the traditional flanks of the party. Though not expressed clearly, the pro-freedom profile that crystallized with the “yes” vote on the referendum was a reminder of the reformist movement within the ranks of the RP and the FP, a movement that saw the Recep Tayyip Erdoğan- Abdullah Gül-Bülent Arınç struggle with party traditionalists. This particular evolution within the party, which led to the emergence of a second conservative democrat movement, spelled, in fact, the end of the National View movement. After a party congress on Aug. 21, 2010, marked by a series of unpleasant events, it was Fatih Erbakan's stance on Kurtulmuş which caused Erbakan to say, “He needs to know his place, either he will pledge his fealty, or he'll go.” Kurtulmuş discussed the events of Aug. 21: “It [the Aug. 21 iftar dinner raid by a group of pro-Erbakan SP members who were protesting Kurtulmuş] was worse than the Feb. 28, 1997 coup. It was as though humanity had ended.” These two events seemed to mark a point of no-return in terms of divisions.

It would be overly simplistic to explain away these stances by calling them “ownership quarrels” or any such thing. In fact, the conservative bedrock of voters in Turkey has been undergoing some serious changes ever since the Sept. 12 coup, or perhaps since that period which saw the sui generis success wrought by conservative Turgut Özal. To wit, the sort of pro-freedom, open-to-the-world and self-confident Özal conservatism that emerged with the collapse of the Motherland Party (ANAVATAN) found a reciprocity from the National View movement, which stood close to it many ways. Contrary to perceptions regarding this, the National View movement has in fact never been a marginal political movement in Turkey. Briefly, the MNP was formed in 1970, forced closed in the 1971 coup, turned later into the MSP, and took 11.8 percent of the vote in the first elections into which it entered in 1973, thereby proving itself a midsized key party, with 48 deputies headed to Parliament. And thus, it joined the ranks in 1974 — alongside other midsized key parties such as Süleyman Demirel's Justice Party (AP), the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and the Republican Reliance Party (CGP) — to make up the Milliyetçi Cephe (Nationalist Front) government. The National View movement continued on its way following the Sept. 12, 1980 coup under the name of the RP, and had a stunning success with the election of Erdoğan to the position of mayor of İstanbul in the 1994 regional elections. By this time, the RP had increased its share of the vote to 19.1 percent. A full 29 regional centers, in both İstanbul and Ankara, were now under the National View's control, which was enough of a development to place the representatives of the secular order, who were to later bring about the Feb. 28, 1997 coup process, on alert. But there is more: in the 1995 parliamentary elections, the RP took 21.4 percent of the votes, winning 158 out of the 550 seats for deputies.

The RP-DYP coalition

Despite all of the footwork that took place in efforts to prevent the formation of a government under the control of the RP, in the end, an RP-True Path Party (DYP) coalition government was successfully formed. During that period, a climate of fear was being purposefully spread throughout the entire nation by experts, with much heated talk of the dark days to come, of how all the modern advances were about to be lost, of how Shariah law was to be implemented at any moment.

At this point it becomes important to distinguish between those creating this climate of fear and those masses on the other side of the curtain, unaware of what was really going on, but feeling the effects. Is that all though? The truth is that there was a widespread perception of the National View's ambivalent stance on the topics of democracy and secularity, as well ambiguities as to whether it viewed democracy as a permanent stopping point, or simply a vehicle by which to achieve its ultimate goals. This ambivalent stance by the National View when it came to the topics of democracy and secularism was reflected in public by representatives of the movement (including Erdoğan himself) and wound up legitimizing the various interventions of the military-bureaucratic guardianship as well as making the general national climate riper for the whole Feb. 28 process. The National View ideology, with Erbakan at its helm, viewed Western civilization and Islamic civilization as incompatible. In this sense then, it took a generalized view of the whole of Western civilization as ontologically "evil." This stance, however, was at direct odds with Turkey's last 200 years of modernization and Westernization.

The model being put forward by Erbakan was an Islamic union to be lead by Turkey. And thus, if Turkey was to be at the helm of this union, the National View's Islamism needed to be injected with a serious dose of nationalism, which was the meaning behind the slogan "Yeniden büyük Türkiye," or "A great Turkey again." Later, with the closure of the RP, a more democratic and moderate political stance began to emerge with the FP. Recai Kutan, who took over the helm from Erbakan, who was now under house arrest, made it clear that terms and concepts such as "National View" and "fair order" were no longer to be used, as they were widely misunderstood. As for its stance on the economy, a more liberal sort of economic policy began to guide it. But the even more important was a shift in the expressed views and perceptions of the West by the party. The FP was now defending the European Union and praising the Copenhagen criteria. In fact, Kutan was proposing the creation of a new civilian constitution in harmony with the EU.

No doubt much of this resulted as an effect of the Feb. 28 coup process. But was that all? Because following the forced closure of the RP, the FP's share of votes in the first elections into which it entered dropped to only 15.4 percent. What exactly caused this drop in votes? Had the FP's switch to a more moderate sort of politics than the RP displeased some of the Islamists? Or, to the contrary, had some of the bedrock voters for this party not seen the National View movement's post-Feb. 28 reassessment and self-criticism as sufficient? Allow me to present my own views on this and propose that, in fact, it was the latter. In doing so, I am not being contradictory either. After all, how else to read the spectacular success of the Justice and Development Party's (AK Party) 34.3 percent of the vote in the 2002 general elections?

Why reward the AK Party?

In other words, why did voters wait to show their reactions to the Feb. 28 process by passing over the 1999 elections and the FP and instead rewarding the AK Party? Similar to the cracks in the ranks of the SP that we see today was when Gül was a candidate in the 2000 party congress, where he beat Kutan by a small margin, all of which was followed up by a split between the reformists and the traditionalists that occurred after the forced closure of the party, with the results playing out in the front of the eyes of the whole bedrock of voters. Why was it that the SP took only 2.5 percent of the votes in the 2002 elections and appeared to have been completely shunned by the bedrock of voters?

The following widely accepted explanation for the above does not seem sufficient to me: that a newly rich, bourgeois and integrated class of conservatives — developing particularly during the 1990s — had emerged as a factor. And this new bedrock of voters did not want to get caught up the adventures of a party which was closed-off to the outside, given to brazen outbursts and tended to open the way for Feb.

28 style interventions. As for the less-wealthy devout of Turkey, they were anxious to see a break in the monopoly on power held by the secular order, as they were also anxious to achieve some prosperity. Yes, these analyses are true, they are what we constantly repeat; but, they do not quite capture the full picture.

I believe there is another factor at hand which we often overlook. I realized this during the verbal clashes or the “Surah [section from the Quran] wars” that took place after the MHP leader made statements that, from the outside, may have appeared to be reactions to the prayer services at Akhtamar and Sümela, but which were actually in response to his defeat in the recent referendums. These clashes played out in the wake of the “prayer activities” which took place at the, you call it the Fethiye Mosque and I’ll call it the Holy Virgin Cathedral, at the ruins of Ani.

I became even surer of this realization of mine — which I will explain a few lines later — after reading about Muhammed Arkoun in an article entitled “A farewell to an intellectual revolutionary,” written by Hiam Nawas and Michel Zoghby, and printed in Today’s Zaman on Oct. 2.

Arkoun was a scholar and an academic at Princeton University and was well known for his theories on Islam and the matter of Modern Islam. He was someone who had sparked some serious debates within the Islamic realms by way of his pro-freedom ideas.

The article about him seemed to encapsulate the reasons for the historic changes in the National View’s thinking in Turkey, as well as the Feb. 28 turning point and the favors bestowed by the people of the nation on the AK Party, which itself emerged as a result of the changes sparked by the Feb. 28 process:

“For Arkoun, the intellectual pluralism which dominated Islam’s Golden Age from the eighth through 13th centuries was fundamental to Muslim civilization’s success. But he saw the current use of religion as a means of legitimizing political power, by both the Arab world’s post-colonial rulers and their rivals who have sought a formal role for Islam in politics, as a crime.”

For Arkoun, the transformation of Islam into a vehicle with which to grab political power is a clear crime. Yes, it is true that, as with Christianity and many other religions, Islam also offers a variety of suggestions on the many ways to live your life. But according to Arkoun, the use of these suggestions by a particular politics or ideology is a kind of exploitation, even a crime. Arkoun notes that this is precisely what is happening nowadays, not only in the Arab world, but also in the various chambers of post-colonial powers around the world, and that as such, asserting then that in fact, the magic of Islam’s Golden Age was rather its pluralistic intellectual stance.

In brief, what we’re really talking about here is the exploitation of religion.

For this reason, what MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli did at Ani was in fact exploitation of religion, and is, according to Arkoun, a crime. At the same time though, when the AK Party’s Egemen Bağış, in an effort to reveal Bahçeli’s exploitative moves, told him to read the Quran’s Surah Al-Maun, and when, in response, Mehmet Şandır noted that Bağış ought to read the Surah Al-Ma’idah (which warns against befriending Jewish and Christian people), these were also examples of the exploitation of religion.

Personally, I do not think that any of Turkey’s devout have been pleased by these arguments, or the use of belief to the benefit of politics. At the same time, I believe that the key to success of the changes presented by the AK Party and Kurtulmuş lie in a certain distancing from this sort of mentality.

Sources

Source : Taraf, 14 October 2010, Thursday