

Politics and Religion in Post-Election Turkey

May 9, 1996



Brief Analysis

Over the past fifty years, in which center-right parties usually have been in power, a moderate state-sanctioned Islam has been gradually on the rise. Increased religious consciousness in Turkey has been fostered through state policies that encourage religious observance and Islamic education. Sufism has also contributed to the revitalization of religion and the rise of political Islam in Turkey. Sufis have pursued their goal of Islamizing society by working within the system, carrying out charitable activities and developing businesses. Currently, 1-2 percent of the government's budget is earmarked for support of religious institutions. Militant Islam, however, is relatively weak in Turkey. Islamic terrorists are few in number and have committed relatively few acts, contrary to the case in Egypt and Algeria.

The Refah (Welfare) Party

The pro-Islamist Refah Party supports the unity of Islam and the state. It initially relied on ideology to mobilize support in pursuit of its aim of Islamizing the basic institutions of society. In recent years, however, its leaders have taken a pragmatic and gradualist approach to their goals. The thousands of activists that are an integral part of the party's elaborate organization focus their efforts on the urban poor.

The party's platform (constitutionally constrained from calling openly for an Islamic state) focuses on secular concerns. First, it makes a strong commitment to the underprivileged, addressing such issues as unemployment and workers' lack of social security. As the ruling parties came increasingly to be viewed as corrupt and elitist, the Refah Party also adopted the "discourse of the poor." It emphasizes socio-economic justice, denounces the existing system of "slavery," and proposes a "just society" based on social equality and social security. Second, Refah emphasizes the need for a strong political authority and a lawful, rule-bound society. This is a response to the great turmoil that people on the periphery of urban life experience everyday. Third, Refah tries to respond to a series of problems associated with a widely perceived decline of community and public morals.

In the 1995 elections, Refah came in first with 21.5 percent of the vote. Its electoral support is almost exclusively Sunni, and it is increasingly popular among the Kurdish-speaking population. Its strongholds are mainly provincial towns and cities in central Anatolia and the eastern Black Sea region. The foundation of Refah's urban support lies in shanty-towns and among low-wage earners.

Compared with the results of nationwide local elections in 1994, the Refah vote in 1995 stagnated and even declined in such major cities as Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara, where socio-economic structures are relatively strong. But Refah's vote increased 5-10 percent in most central Anatolian provincial towns and cities, areas badly affected by the growth of an export economy in Turkey and a decline in large-scale public enterprise. It is the increasing support that Refah is gaining in central Anatolia that could bring it to power.

The Post-Election Scene

As the main opposition party, Refah will do anything it can to delegitimize the government. Through high-profile participation in parliament, Refah hopes to moderate its image, bringing it more respectability and legitimacy

among ordinary voters. The forces arrayed against it are formidable, however. The major secular political parties, the military, leading business circles, and the urban elite all generally oppose Refah's coming to power. Although the officer corps in the military may have become more religious over the years, the institution continues to favor a secularist structure for the state. It will be very sensitive to Refah efforts to infiltrate it.

Were it to come to power, Refah would effectively use government resources to widen its political base, as it has in the municipalities it now governs. Once in power, however, Refah would face the challenge of solving the insoluble economic problems over which recent Turkish governments have stumbled. Also, it would almost inevitably become involved in corruption, as other parties have, thus diminishing its current appeal as a "clean" party.

Under a different name more than twenty-five years ago, the Refah Party originally emerged as a representative of small businessmen. However, recent years have seen the emergence of a new type of Islamist business executive, operating large-scale enterprises and mirroring the economic and cultural consumption patterns of Europeans. This change in the party's constituency also presents a challenge. If Refah acquires a bourgeois image or appears too supportive of the establishment, it risks alienating its disadvantaged supporters.

Refah's Foreign Policy

As a result of the new customs union agreement with the European Union, ties between Turkey and the West will grow, even were the anti-Western Refah Party to assume power. It would be very difficult for a future Refah government to de-link Turkey from the EU or from its "strategic partnership" in NATO. Indeed, there are commercial and Western-educated circles emerging in Refah that want to build Turkey's ties with the West and the United States; this development suggests Refah may eventually adopt a positive attitude toward the West.

Refah is extremely cautious not to alienate any Islamic country, be it Iran, Libya, Syria, or Saudi Arabia. The party is particularly protective of its relations with Iran. Refah leader Necmettin Erbakan is a frequent visitor to the Iranian Embassy, and one Refah parliamentarian even defended Iran in the wake of revelations suggesting Tehran had backed terrorism aimed at Turkish secularists. The foreign policy issues to which Refah is most sensitive are Azerbaijan, Bosnia, and Chechnya—all instances of Muslim-vs.-Christian disputes. Refah has an unfavorable view of Israel; party leaders consistently blame Zionism for all the world's ills, especially economic decline in the Islamic world. Regarding Greece, Refah takes a position similar to that of the hard-line nationalist right. Foreign policy is not a vote-getter for Refah, however. Azerbaijan and Bosnia are the only foreign policy issues of concern to most Refah voters.

Conclusions: The Secularist Reaction

Refah's success in grassroots organizing has prompted the rise of parallel secularist political groups. One such organization, the "Association of Atatürkist Thought," has become Turkey's most powerful secular civil society organization, branching out into several provincial towns and cities. Founded some two years ago, it now has 204 branches and 50,000 members. To increase its popularity, it has engaged in charitable activities, following the pattern of its Islamic counterparts. The Association is growing rapidly and is likely to become an important political force in Turkey.

Refah's power is heightened by "artificial," non-ideological divisions among its secular opponents. In the December 1995 general elections, 78.5 percent of the population rejected Refah and affirmed support for secularism. Had the two major parties on each side of the political spectrum been united, the enlarged center-right and center-left parties would have received 39 percent and 26 percent of the vote, respectively, leaving Refah a distant third.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Joanne Davis.

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