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# The Far Right, Labor Unions, and the Working Class in Turkey since the 1960s

İlker Aytürk and Berk Esen

*This article tracks far-right attitudes and policies toward organized labor and the working class in Turkey since the 1960s. In particular, we attempt to explain why nationalist attitudes have remained unchanged over nearly six decades, whereas political Islamists have shifted to neoliberal policies since the 1990s under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In explaining Erdoğan's neoliberalism, we highlight the working relationship between Islamist mayors and the so-called pious bourgeoisie in local governments as well as the willingness of neoliberal ulema to endorse these ties.*

**A**ddressing a group of Turkish businessmen and foreign investors in July 2017, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan revealed yet another justification for why he had declared a state of emergency after the coup attempt in 2016:

We declared [and continue] a state of emergency so that our business community can work better. I am asking, in the business community, do you have any problems, or face any obstruction? When we came to power [in 2002], there was again a state of emergency, but all industrial plants were under the threat of labor strikes. Remember those days. But right now, wherever there is the threat of a labor strike, we immediately intervene by using [extraordinary rights provided by] the state of emergency. Because, you [i.e., unnamed enemies of Turkey] cannot harm our business community. That is how we are using the state of emergency.<sup>1</sup>

Erdoğan's statement would have been unimaginable to Turkish far-right politicians of an earlier generation. Historically, the Turkish far right, both in its nationalist and Islamist versions,<sup>2</sup> had never been so blatantly pro-business. Far-right leaders from the

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1. "Erdoğan'dan İtiraf: OHAL'den İstifade Ederek Grevlere Anında Müdahale Ediyoruz" ["Erdoğan's confession: We prevent strikes immediately by using the state of emergency"], *Cumhuriyet*, July 12, 2017, [www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/siyaset/779522/Erdoğan\\_dan\\_itiraf\\_OHAL\\_den\\_istifade\\_ederek\\_grevlere\\_anında\\_mudahale\\_ediyoruz.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/siyaset/779522/Erdoğan_dan_itiraf_OHAL_den_istifade_ederek_grevlere_anında_mudahale_ediyoruz.html).

2. To distinguish the far right from the center right in Turkish politics, we rely partly on Nuray Mert's seminal work, *Merkez Sağın Kısa Tarihi* [A short history of the center right] (Istanbul: Selis,

1960s to the 1990s, such as Necmettin Erbakan and Alparslan Türkeş, would not have committed themselves nor their respective parties to such a business-friendly economic agenda. However, Turkish political Islamists of the younger generation parted ways with the nationalists in the mid-1990s and embraced neoliberal policies that advocated deregulation, privatization, flexible employment patterns, and an increased role for private economic actors in the public sector.<sup>3</sup>

In this article, we propose to study the Turkish far right's attitudes toward labor and the working class since the 1960s and to explain this parting of ways. In a nutshell, we argue that Turkish political Islamists shifted from a policy of engagement with workers and a partial accommodation of labor interests in the 1970s to a new and increasingly pro-business economic strategy in the 1990s, which paved the way for the Justice and Development Party (AKP, from the Turkish *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) and its neoliberal agenda, summarized very succinctly in Erdoğan's statement above. Two developments facilitated this shift. First was the capture of metropolitan governments such as Istanbul, Ankara, and other major cities in 1994 by the AKP's predecessor, the Welfare Party (RP, from *Refah Partisi*), creating a political space where Islamist politicians could rub shoulders with business elites. Second was the emergence of pro-business interpreters of Islamic law after Prime Minister Turgut Özal's economic reforms in the 1980s, providing a legal-ideological impetus for a more market-oriented Islamic economics. Particularly symbolic in this regard was a successful model established by Erdoğan during his mayoralty in Istanbul between 1994 and 1998, when pro-business religious scholars like Hayrettin Karaman justified a compact in Islamic terms between the mayor's office and businessmen affiliated with the Islamist movement, the so-called pious bourgeoisie. On the other hand, the nationalist far right's attitude toward labor did not undergo a similar transformation and, compared to the Islamists, has remained largely unchanged since the 1970s. We will attempt to explain this constancy in nationalist attitudes regarding labor issues in similar terms, that is, first, by the lack of a nationalist intelligentsia that could have played a role similar to the business-friendly ulema, and second, by the inability of the nationalists to capture major municipalities in the 1990s and 2000s.

[Continued from preceding page]

2007), 17–64. The Turkish far right is characterized by an emphasis on identity politics and represents a challenge to secularism and the Kemalist nationalism of the founders of the republic. The nationalist far-right challenges the more inclusivist versions of Turkish nationalism and, in general, favors an ethnic definition of Turkishness. The Islamist far right, on the other hand, promises to turn the tide of secularism and, if possible, to consolidate Turkey's Muslim identity. In contrast, the center-right tradition — represented by the Democrat Party in the 1950s, the Justice Party in the 1960s and 1970s, the Motherland Party and the True Path Party in the 1980s and 1990s, and the Justice and Development Party until 2008 — is distinguished by a discourse of development and economic redistribution policies.

3. In this article, we define neoliberalism as a process that removes restrictions and regulations within a capitalist economy to allow market-based solutions to shape socioeconomic and political outcomes. For alternative conceptualizations of neoliberalism, see Bob Jessop, "Liberalism, Neoliberalism, and Urban Governance: A State-Theoretical Perspective," *Antipode* 34, no. 3 (July 2002): 452–472. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8330.00250>; David, Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). For a concise summary of Turkish neoliberalism, see Sinan Erensü and Yahya M. Madra, "Neoliberal Politics in Turkey," in *The Oxford Handbook of Turkish Politics*, ed. Güneş Murat Tezcür (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 159–86.

Scholars have widely classified the AKP as the party of business and highlighted the pious bourgeoisie as the dominant faction behind the Islamist movement's transformation in the 2000s.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, the support given by the pious bourgeoisie to neoliberal reforms tempered the otherwise heterodox economic views of the Islamist old guard and facilitated the AKP's rise.<sup>5</sup> While the AKP's links with entrepreneurs have been widely studied, scholars have not adequately analyzed the Islamist movement's position on organized labor and the working class in historical perspective.<sup>6</sup> The nationalist right's links with the same groups have been explored even less. The extant scholarship instead focuses on how the AKP expanded its support among the urban poor by distributing aid through religious charitable foundations, local governments, and state organizations<sup>7</sup> and by providing more effective social and healthcare services than its competitors.<sup>8</sup> The party's extensive network in metropolitan areas has also generated considerable attention in recent studies.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, there is only a small number of studies that place the ruling AKP in the larger historical context of far-right movements in Turkey. Although the Islamist old guard in the RP retained heterodox economic views, younger politicians in major metropolitan areas like Erdoğan embraced pro-market views in the 1990s.<sup>10</sup> And yet, we know relatively little on the Islamist movement's ideological transformation in the post-1980 period.<sup>11</sup> Whereas, in the 1970s, the National Order Party (MNP,

4. Sebnem Gumuscu, "Class, Status, and Party: The Changing Face of Political Islam in Turkey and Egypt," *Comparative Political Studies* 43, no. 7 (July 2010): 835–61. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414010361341>.

5. Seda Demiralp, "The Rise of Islamic Capital and the Decline of Islamic Radicalism in Turkey," *Comparative Politics* 41, no. 3 (Apr. 2009): 328–30. <https://doi.org/10.5129/001041509X12911362972278>.

6. Aziz Çelik, "Turkey's New Labour Regime under the Justice and Development Party in the First Decade of the Twenty-First Century: Authoritarian Flexibilization," *Middle Eastern Studies* 51, no. 4 (2015): 618–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2014.987665>; Sümercan Bozkurt-Güngen, "Labour and Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Changes and Continuities under the AKP Governments in Turkey," *South European Society and Politics* 23, no. 2 (2018): 219–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2018.1471834>.

7. Fulya Apaydin, "Financialization and the Push for Non-State Social Service Provision: Philanthropic Activities of Islamic and Conventional Banks in Turkey," *Forum for Development Studies* 42, no. 3 (2015): 441–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08039410.2015.1033453>; Erdem Yörük, "Welfare Provision as Political Containment: The Politics of Social Assistance and the Kurdish Conflict in Turkey," *Politics and Society* 40, no. 4 (Dec. 2012): 517–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329212461130>.

8. Ayşe Bugra and Aysen Candas, "Change and Continuity under an Eclectic Social Security Regime: The Case of Turkey," *Middle Eastern Studies* 47, no. 3 (May 2011): 515–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2011.565145>; Tim Dorlach, "The Prospects of Egalitarian Capitalism in the Global South: Turkish Social Neoliberalism in Comparative Perspective," *Economy and Society* 44, no. 4 (2015): 519–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2015.1090736>.

9. Toygar Sinan Baykan, *The Justice and Development Party in Turkey: Populism, Personalism, Organization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Sevinç Doğan, *Mahalledeki AKP: Parti İşleyişi, Taban Mobilizasyonu ve Siyasal Yabancılaşma* [The AKP in the neighborhood: The party mechanism, grassroots mobilization, and political alienation] (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2016).

10. Cihan Tuğal, *Passive Revolution: Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

11. Three studies compensate partially for this lack of contextualization, see Banu Eligür, *The Mobilization of Political Islam in Turkey* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Ceren Lord,

from *Milli Nizam Partisi*), later renamed as the National Salvation Party (MSP, from *Milli Selamet Partisi*), promoted a state-led developmentalist economic agenda in line with its popular base in underdeveloped Anatolian provinces, the AKP adopted a pro-business program that catered heavily to entrepreneurs and contractors. Similarities in their cultural agendas notwithstanding, the transformation in the Islamist movement's economic program was dramatic and requires critical scrutiny.

The extant scholarship has focused on the divergence of these two groups after the Constitutional Court's 1998 ban on the RP but neglected the earlier period. Existing studies attribute a central role to the pious bourgeoisie in accounting for the transformation of the Islamist movement but ignore the agency of the RP's political cadres, particularly at the local level. We know that the party's control of local governments in major urban centers provided the Islamist movement with ample opportunities for patronage and revenues and was a major factor in catapulting Erdoğan to national leadership in the 2000s. Yet, limited research has been done so far on how RP-controlled municipalities in the 1990s interacted with their workers.<sup>12</sup> Scholarship on the Nationalist Movement Party (sometimes rendered as the Nationalist Action Party; MHP, from *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*), on the other hand, focuses on the party's organization and official ideology but fails to take note of its policy toward organized labor.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, few scholars have focused on the critical role played by the ulema in aligning Islam to the neoliberal economic project,<sup>14</sup> and none have explored their shifting position over a longer historical period, especially their anti-leftist and anti-labor attitudes.

Our article intends to make several contributions to the literature. First, it offers a much-needed historical dimension to the extant scholarship by tracing the Islamist and nationalist movements' political attitude toward organized labor and the working class. Our discussion of the Islamist movement's historical links to the working class adds to accounts of the AKP's success in harmonizing Islam with neoliberal capitalism. We demonstrate that there is as much rupture as continuity in the way Islamist parties have dealt with the labor question in Turkey. Second, in sharp contrast to studies that focus on the AKP, we identify the 1990s as a critical juncture for the transformation of political Islam's economic agenda on labor and emphasize the agency of RP mayors and their supporters within the business sector and the ulema community. Third, we provide a comparative focus by juxtaposing the Islamist movement to its historical rival, the

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*Religious Politics in Turkey: From the Birth of the Republic to the AKP* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 209–84; Sultan Tepe, *Beyond Sacred and Secular: Politics of Religion in Israel and Turkey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

12. For an important study on this topic, see Ali Ekber Doğan, *Eğreti Kamusalılık: Kayseri Örneğinde İslamcı Belediyecilik* [The makeshift public: Islamist municipal government in the case of Kayseri] (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2007).

13. Jacob M. Landau, "The Nationalist Action Party in Turkey," *Journal of Contemporary History* 17, no. 4 (Oct. 1982): 587–606. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F002200948201700402>; İlker Aytürk, "Nationalism and Islam in Cold War Turkey, 1944–69," *Middle Eastern Studies* 50, no. 5 (2014): 693–719. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2014.911177>; Alev Çınar and Burak Arıkan, "The Nationalist Action Party: Representing the State, the Nation or the Nationalists?" *Turkish Studies* 3, no. 1 (2002): 25–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/714005706>.

14. Nikos Moudouros, "The 'Harmonization' of Islam with the Neoliberal Transformation: The Case of Turkey," *Globalizations* 11, no. 6 (2014): 843–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2014.904157>.

nationalist MHP. This article provides a historical overview of how the Turkish far right approached organized labor and the working class in Turkey. We begin by exploring the historical links between the nationalist far right and organized labor before turning the spotlight onto the evolution of political Islam in Turkey and Islamist policies vis-à-vis labor and the working class since the 1960s. We then conclude by discussing how this political shift, supported by pro-business ulema and the pious bourgeoisie, eventually culminated in the rise of Erdoğan's AKP, while the MHP did not experience a similar transformation and remained excluded from power both at national and local levels.

### *THE NATIONALIST FAR RIGHT: THE MHP*

The growing popularity of left-wing ideas and the Turkish Workers Party (*Türkiye İşçi Partisi*) in the 1960s provided the initial impetus for the birth and expansion of far-right parties in Turkey. The first to take action were the nationalists, led by one of the members of the junta of 1960, Colonel Alparslan Türkeş (ret.), who seized leadership of a minor center-right party in 1965 and renamed it the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) in 1969.<sup>15</sup> Türkeş's goal was to capture the expanding far-right vote with a combined agenda of ethnic nationalism and a state-led industrialization program. However, his secular nationalist rhetoric failed to appeal to far-right voters, who were mostly pious Muslims and glorified Islamic values as much as Turkish nationalism. Facing competition from political Islamists from the 1969 elections on, the MHP leadership was forced to adjust the party ideology to capture a larger segment of the far-right vote. Though established by a secular military officer, the MHP gradually embraced Islamic values. Despite his charismatic personality, however, Colonel Türkeş was not a great political success and neither was his party. The MHP made a poor showing in the elections during its first two decades, garnering 3.0 percent of the vote in 1969, 3.4 percent in 1973, and 6.4 percent in 1977.<sup>16</sup> However, the party's political weight and street visibility was incomparably larger than its strength in the ballot box. Türkeş and the MHP fought at the forefront of the political battle against the Turkish far left in the 1970s, a struggle that nearly deteriorated into civil war between 1975 and the 1980 coup.<sup>17</sup> Street violence that pitted the militants of both sides against each other claimed the lives of some 2,500 members of the Idealist Hearths (*Ülkü Ocakları*), an organization affiliated with the MHP.

Especially in the 1970s, the MHP leadership exercised a complex approach toward the Turkish working class. The Turkish left commanded more than 40 percent of the national vote and seemed to have a monopoly over ideas surrounding social justice at a time of rapid industrial and economic development. In response, Türkeş needed to fight against the left without alienating the growing mass of Turkish workers,

15. Ferit Salim Sanlı, *Cumhuriyetçi Köylü Millet Partisi'nden Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi'ne: Tarihi Süreç, İdeoloji ve Politika (1960–1969)* [From the Republican Peasant–Nation Party to the Nationalist Movement Party: History, ideology, and politics, 1960–69] (Istanbul: Ötüken, 2019).

16. Landau, "The Nationalist Action Party in Turkey," 590.

17. Sabri Sayari, "Political Violence and Terrorism in Turkey, 1976–80: A Retrospective Analysis," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 2 (2010): 203, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550903574438>; Alp Yenen, "Legitimate Means of Dying: Contentious Politics of Martyrdom in the Turkish Civil War (1968–1982)," *Behemoth* 12 (2019): 26–27, <https://doi.org/10.6094/behemoth.2019.12.1.1004>.

whom he considered as potential right-wing voters due to their conservative cultural backgrounds. Indeed, Turkish workers in the 1970s were mostly rural–urban migrants, having recently arrived to industrial centers from the pious Turkish periphery. Türkeş yearned to find a way to convince them that his party could serve their interests better than the Turkish left. His solution was to integrate some aspects of leftist discourse surrounding labor rights into the MHP’s far-right ideology, while dismissing other aspects as a secret Communist plot to weaken Turkish national solidarity. In party documents, the MHP acknowledged that workers were a building block of the Turkish nation. Türkeş promised Turkish workers shares in future industrial plants, seats on boards of directors, and called for allocating a set portion of companies’ annual profits to them. Furthermore, he set out to enshrine these promises into the country’s constitution.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, MHP party programs and handbooks from the time state clearly that the rights of Turkish workers, such as the right to strike for better pay and higher standards, would be preserved. Doing otherwise would be tantamount to exploitation of workers in the hands of capitalists, and the party leadership declared that it would not allow that.<sup>19</sup> Naturally, the unit of analysis in the MHP ideology was not class but the nation, which, the party claimed, was made up of six constituent parts: workers, farmers, artisans, civil servants, entrepreneurs, and free professionals. The MHP aimed to blend all six in one whole and not let one or two groups dominate the rest.<sup>20</sup> Corporatist in design, the party advocated management of social demands by representative bodies for each of the constituent parts. For every citizen in need, the party promised a minimum wage that would be “enough to lead an honorable life” and medical insurance.<sup>21</sup>

This policy discourse was too good to be entirely true. In reality, the MHP’s handling of labor questions was full of loopholes and did not prioritize worker interests, as party documents show. First of all, the MHP valued nationalist interests above everything else, including those of labor and capital:

In the Nationalist Movement, we approach and organize labor and capital, not as two enemies, which struggle and attempt to destroy one another, but as two brothers, who complement each other. Our belief and opinion is [to provide] peace between labor and capital. Our national development and economic progress can be fast, balanced and just, only if labor and capital are integrated [toward the same goal].<sup>22</sup>

Second, the MHP defined what could be considered legitimate action for workers and their representatives. “Labor and capital may not have activities beyond national unity and interest,” declares a 1977 party propaganda handbook, and “[I]abor and capital must be protected and supported to the extent that they serve national interests.”<sup>23</sup> The MHP encouraged the establishment of representative institutions for both employers and

18. MHP, *Milliyetçi Hareketin El Kitabı* [The handbook of the Nationalist Movement] (Ankara: Emel Matbaacılık, 1973), 27–28.

19. MHP, *Milliyetçi Hareketin El Kitabı* [The handbook of the Nationalist Movement], 28–29.

20. İlker Aytürk, “Türkiye’de Uç Sağ ve Emek” [The far right and labor in Turkey], *Birikim* no. 365 (Sept. 2019): 11.

21. MHP, *Milliyetçi Hareketin El Kitabı* [The handbook of the Nationalist Movement], 6–17.

22. MHP, *Milliyetçi Hareketin El Kitabı* [The handbook of the Nationalist Movement], 23.

23. MHP, *1977 Seçim Beyannamesi* [The 1977 election statement] (Ankara: Emel Matbaacılık, 1977), 24.

workers in the industrial sector. However, it would not allow them to follow “ideological principles, which would strengthen class consciousness and create an antagonistic outlook about other social groups; [these organizations] would constitute a constructive component of national unity and hierarchy.” Thus, labor unions were endowed with a nationalist mission that could not be reduced to only demands for better pay and more rights for workers. They instead ought to represent “the responsibilities of the workers in line with the requirements of the master plan for national development.”<sup>24</sup> Third, despite its ostensibly unconditional support for the right to strike, the party leadership found it “natural” that, “under a future MHP government, this right would be redefined to make it more fair and reconciled with national interests.” The MHP refused to believe in the existence of “a Turkish worker,” who could “set Turkey on fire for class interests only and considers his class interests above national interests.” Furthermore, the party resolved to struggle against “harmful movements, which advise their followers to use accumulated rights irresponsibly and against the unity of the state and the nation.”<sup>25</sup>

The MHP also sought to control the Turkish workers’ movement in the 1970s by establishing friendly trade unions. To that end, the MHP recommended amending the Turkish law on unions to bring in a new system in which there would be only one union for each sector with obligatory membership for all.<sup>26</sup> The MHP’s proposal aimed to recruit the Turkish working class for the greater ideal of national development, tame their “excessive” demands, and force them to collaborate harmoniously with the other so-called constitutive groups of Turkish society.

Türkeş attempted to realize this dream as early as 1970 and ordered the founding of the Confederation of Nationalist Workers’ Unions (MİSK, from *Milliyetçi İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu*) to mobilize Turkish workers for the nationalist cause and to lure them away from the leftist alternative, the Confederation of Revolutionary Workers’ Unions (DİSK, from *Devrimci İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu*). MİSK achieved a membership of approximately 5,000 in its first year and grew to more than 200,000 by 1977.<sup>27</sup> However, this figure was more fiction than fact, since membership logs were not kept properly and, more significantly, the MHP ministers in the Nationalist Front coalition governments (1975–77) coerced public sector workers into the union.<sup>28</sup> Based on the guiding principle of “obligatory membership in a single union for every sector,” MİSK declared its mission to be rooted in the love of the nation and respect for human rights. The union’s bylaws called for “molding the Turkish worker, his/her spouse, and their children into Turkish and Islamic culture” and supporting all members in their quest for “social justice, social security and human rights . . . so long

24. MHP, *Milliyetçi Hareketin El Kitabı* [The handbook of the Nationalist Movement], 80.

25. MHP, *Milliyetçi Hareketin El Kitabı* [The handbook of the Nationalist Movement], 83.

26. MHP, *Milliyetçi Hareketin El Kitabı* [The handbook of the Nationalist Movement], 24–25; MHP, *1977 Seçim Beyannamesi* [The 1977 election statement], 34–35.

27. Yıldırım Koç, “Milliyetçi İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu: MİSK” [“The Confederation of Nationalist Labor Unions: MİSK”], *Kebikeç* no. 5 (1997): 207–9. DİSK membership eventually reached some 500,000 before the 1980 coup. For further information of its membership and organizational structure, see *MİSK ne Dedi? 1977* [What did MİSK say? 1977] (Ankara: MİSK, 1977); *Bombalanan ve Kurşunlanan MİSK* [Bombed and shot MİSK] (Ankara: MİSK, 1979).

28. Koç, “Milliyetçi İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu” [“The Confederation of Nationalist Labor Unions”], 207–9.



as they are loyal to Turkish nationalism.”<sup>29</sup> In 1979, MİSK even warned its members that International Workers’ Day on May 1 was not a patriotic occasion to celebrate and that they should avoid participation.<sup>30</sup>

Following the coup d’état of 1980, the military government closed down all political parties and prominent civil society organizations, including the MHP and MİSK, and banned political leaders from active politics. Türkeş and other prominent MHP figures were prosecuted and imprisoned for several years thereafter.<sup>31</sup> The ban was repealed by a 1987 referendum, and Türkeş reassumed leadership of the nationalist right. Crushed by the generals during the three years of military rule, the Turkish left was but a shadow of its former self, with its important organizations and parties outlawed and its leadership mostly in prison and divided. Under these new circumstances, Türkeş downplayed the struggle against the Turkish left in the MHP agenda and replaced it with what he perceived as the new rising threat to the Turkish nation-state: Kurdish nationalism. Accordingly, the new MHP paid scant attention to labor questions, so much so that, having revived MİSK in 1984, the nationalist leadership decided to bring it to a close after only four years. This trend continued even after the passing of Türkeş in 1997 and under the MHP’s new leader, Devlet Bahçeli. Since the 1990s, the party’s share of the vote has been above the 10 percent electoral threshold every time (except for the 2002 elections), but it has consistently failed to win a plurality.<sup>32</sup>

Although the MHP dropped labor problems from its agenda, it did not adopt a neoliberal, pro-business orientation like the AKP. The MHP has traditionally been and still is very protective of farmers, artisans, workers, and of small businesses and supportive of state intervention in favor of compensating the main losers of the globalizing Turkish economy. While some members of the Turkish ulema developed novel interpretations of shari’a that embraced business-friendly economic views in the 1980s and in turn legitimized pro-business attitudes within Turkish political Islam, there was no comparable neoliberal intelligentsia in the far-right nationalist circles. Likewise, with the exception of Adana in 2009,<sup>33</sup> the MHP did not succeed in capturing major municipalities from the 1980s to the 2000s, and, therefore, party elites and mayors did not have the opportunity to come into contact with big business elites. All in all, neoliberal economic policies and jargon did not seep into MHP rhetoric. The nationalist attitude toward labor and the working class has not changed either, despite the MHP’s ongoing electoral alliance with Erdoğan’s AKP since 2016. This is one important major policy area that distinguishes nationalists from the political Islamists.

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29. Koç, “Milliyetçi İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu” [“The Confederation of Nationalist Labor Unions”], 208.

30. *MİSK Uyarıyor: Vatansever Türk İşçisi 1 Mayıs Senin Bayramın Değildir* [MİSK warns: Patriotic Turkish worker, May 1 is not to be celebrated] (Istanbul: MİSK, 1979).

31. Fatih Çağatay Cengiz, “Resistance to Change: The Ideological Immoderation of the Nationalist Action Party in Turkey,” *Turkish Studies* 22, no. 3 (2021): 473, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2020.1850283>.

32. For concise summaries of the MHP’s evolution under Türkeş’s and Bahçeli’s leadership, see Çınar and Arıkan, “Nationalist Action Party” and Cengiz, “Resistance to Change.”

33. Banu Eligür, “Turkey’s March 2009 Local Elections,” *Turkish Studies* 10, no. 3 (2009): 480, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683840903141814>.

*ISLAMIST PARTIES FROM THE 1970S TO THE PRESENT*

The first Islamist party of the republican period, the National Order Party (MNP), was established in 1970 by a broad coalition of political Islamists who referred to themselves as Milli Görüş (literally, “national outlook”). The Constitutional Court closed down the MNP following the military intervention of 1971, but Milli Görüş soon reestablished itself in 1972 under a new name: the National Salvation Party (MSP). The party’s supporters consisted of lower-middle-class shopkeepers and small business owners, members of religious orders, and pious Kurds, all representing the anti-establishment tendencies of republican Turkey’s opposition. The MSP quickly emerged as a major rival to the center-right Justice Party in the Anatolian heartland and obtained 12.3 percent and 8.6 percent of the vote in the 1973 and 1977 general elections, respectively.<sup>34</sup> Catering to pious Sunni voters, the MSP had a much stronger electoral presence than the MHP in the central and eastern Anatolian provinces in this period.

The most important item on the MSP agenda was its pledge to carry out a moral revolution to undo the secular reforms of the early republic and re-create Turkey as a Muslim nation. This form of identity politics was also accompanied by a utopian desire to restructure the Turkish economy along the lines of Islamic principles and morality. The MSP, for instance, had an aversion to interest-based credit and even contemplated a possible return to the gold standard. Later, in the 1990s, the MSP advocated for what it called the “just order” (*adil düzen*), an economic model that was thoroughly anti-capitalist and welcomed massive state intervention by carving a huge role for the public sector in the Turkish economy.<sup>35</sup> When in power as part of coalition governments in 1973 and in 1975–77, MSP leader Necmettin Erbakan indeed initiated state-led industrialization plans and programs for the redistribution of wealth from urban centers to small towns and, within the urban centers, from the secular middle class to shantytown dwellers, which included the working class as well.<sup>36</sup>

In sharp contrast to the MHP, Milli Görüş parties were late in attempting to organize an Islamist labor movement. The MSP established the Confederation of Righteous Workers’ Unions (*Hak İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu*, or Hak-İş for short) as the unofficial party branch for Turkish workers in 1976, six years after the MHP established MİSK.<sup>37</sup> MSP ministers used their offices to boost membership in the union up to approximately 100,000 by 1977, but membership declined considerably after the fall of the coalition government.<sup>38</sup> The generals closed down Hak-İş alongside all political parties and trade unions following the coup d’état of 1980. However, while DİSK and MİSK

34. İlhan Tekeli and Raşit Gökçeli, *1973 ve 1975 Seçimleri: Seçim Coğrafyası Üzerine bir Deneme* [The 1973 and 1975 elections: An essay on electoral geography] (Istanbul: Milliyet Yayınları, 1977).

35. Necmettin Erbakan, *Adil Ekonomik Düzen* [The just economic order] (Ankara: Refah Partisi, 1991); Menderes Çınar, “İslami Ekonomi ve Refah’ın Adil Ekonomik Düzeni” [“Islamic economics and the just economic order of the Welfare (Party)”], *Birikim* 59 (Mar. 1994): 21–32.

36. Necmettin Erbakan, *Ağır Sanayi* [Heavy industry] (Ankara: Başbakan Yardımcılığı Basın Müşavirliği, 1976).

37. For the Hak-İş website see, [www.hakis.org.tr](http://www.hakis.org.tr). For an academic introduction, see Burhanettin Duran and Engin Yıldırım, “Islamism, Trade Unionism and Civil Society: The Case of Hak-İş Labour Confederation in Turkey,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 41, no. 2 (Mar. 2005): 227–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263200500035199>.

38. Duran and Yıldırım, “Islamism, Trade Unionism and Civil Society,” 232.

were not allowed to resume their activities, Hak-İş reopened in 1981 with the blessing of the military regime.<sup>39</sup> The collaboration between the generals and the Islamists gained publicity when Hak-İş, in return, publicly defended the coup and the measures taken against DİSK, revealing a shared interest in thwarting left-wing mobilization.<sup>40</sup>

Similar to MİSK, Hak-İş too denounced capitalism and socialism in the 1970s as materialistic systems of thought alien to the Muslim Turkish people.<sup>41</sup> In contrast with MİSK, however, Hak-İş impressed on its members the primacy of their religious identity over class interests. This attitude changed with the election of a new chairman in 1983, Necati Çelik, who carefully moved away from Erbakan's newly established Welfare Party (RP) to focus instead on common labor problems in the post-coup era. Çelik's decision was pragmatic. With the return to democratic politics in 1983, authorities allowed only two labor union confederations: the centrist Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions (*Türkiye İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu*, or Türk-İş) and the conservative Hak-İş. Had it maintained its 1970s rhetoric of subordinating labor interests to Islamist interests, Hak-İş could have suffered from defections to rival labor confederations.<sup>42</sup> In the 1990s, Hak-İş redefined itself as a business-friendly union that envisioned a limited economic role for the state and instead promoted a strong private sector and civil society, which it claimed were necessary for generating an Islamic model of labor relations.<sup>43</sup> The Islamic union gave its support for an employee ownership and management model, as can be evidenced in bidding for shares in the state-owned Kardemir steelworks as it was privatized in 1995.<sup>44</sup>

Feeling the weight of the 1980–83 military regime, Islamist elites reached out to their former supporters and rebuilt their political organization under the umbrella of the RP. Following Erbakan's assumption of the party leadership in 1987, the RP assumed the MSP's electoral strength in that year's general elections and, by 1989, won mayoral races in its traditional strongholds such as Konya, Sivas, Van, and Şanlıurfa. The newly elected RP mayors couched their cities' municipal services and policy agendas in Islamic terms inherited from the MSP. While the RP municipalities increased public

39. Hak-İş, "Tarihçe" ["Short history"], <https://hakis.org.tr/icerik.php?sayfa=3>.

40. Adnan Mahiroğulları, *Cumhuriyetten Günümüze Türkiye'de İşçi Sendikacılığı* [Trade unionism in Turkey from the republican period to the present day] (Istanbul: Kitabevi, 2005), 338.

41. Mahiroğulları, *Cumhuriyetten Günümüze Türkiye'de İşçi Sendikacılığı* [Trade unionism in Turkey from the republican period to the present day], 231.

42. Duran and Yıldırım, "Islamism, Trade Unionism and Civil Society," 233–34. For further information on Hak-İş, see Yıldırım Koç, *Şariatçılar, İşçi Hakları ve Hak-İş* [Shari'a advocates, labor rights and Hak-İş] (Istanbul: Öteki, 1995); *Hak-İş 5. Büyük Genel Kurul'a Sunulan Faaliyet Raporu* [Activity report submitted to the Fifth Hak-İş Convention] (Ankara: Hak-İş Genel Merkezi, 1986); *Hak-İş 6. Olağan Genel Kurul Faaliyet Raporu* [Activity report for the Sixth Hak-İş Convention] (Ankara: Hak-İş, 1989); *Hak-İş 8. Olağan Genel Kurul Sonrası Ana Çizgileriyle Faaliyetler* [Summary of activities in the aftermath of the Eighth Hak-İş Convention] (Ankara: Hak-İş, 1996); *16. Kuruluş Yıldönümü Etkinlikleri* [Activities for the 16th anniversary] (Ankara: Hak-İş, 1991); *Anayasa Kurultayı: 27-28-29 Şubat 1992* [Conference on the constitution: February 27/28/29, 1992] (Ankara: Hak-İş, 1992).

43. Peride K. Blind, *Democratic Institutions of Undemocratic Individuals: Privatizations, Labor, and Democracy in Turkey and Argentina* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 53–55.

44. Ayşe Buğra, "Labour, Capital, and Religion: Harmony and Conflict among the Constituency of Political Islam in Turkey," *Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 2 (2002): 187–204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/714004454>.

spending for the poor and invested in public infrastructure, they also targeted restaurants and bars serving alcohol and adopted conservative cultural policies. At the same time, workers employed by municipal governments were forced to join Hak-İş.<sup>45</sup>

The RP's electoral rise in the 1980s was temporarily eclipsed by the center-left Social Democratic Populist Party (*Sosyaldemokrat Halkçı Parti*, SHP). In the absence of the one-time hegemonic Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), still banned after the 1980 coup, the SHP managed to cobble together a diverse popular coalition of unionized workers, secular middle-class voters, and Kurdish and Alevi constituencies in the 1989 local elections, winning control of 39 provinces, including Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. In the general elections two years later, the SHP won 88 seats in parliament and joined the coalition government.<sup>46</sup> This was a period of heightened labor activism after a decade of economic liberalization, with workers mobilizing en masse to seek better pay and collective rights. However, the SHP failed to consolidate its popularity among working-class voters. Joining the government after the 1991 elections, the party came under heavy criticism for its failure to challenge Prime Minister Turgut Özal's liberal economic policies and for catering to the demands of its Kurdish and Alevi constituencies. Against the backdrop of rising Kurdish separatist violence in the early 1990s, the SHP was plagued with intraparty rifts and could not prevent the formation of splinter parties, including the newly reestablished CHP. At the same time, its municipal governments were implicated in corruption scandals and provided only limited social assistance and public services to low-income voters.<sup>47</sup> These political blunders reduced the SHP's vote share and left workers without a strong voice against the onslaught of parties with neoliberal agendas in the 1990s.

The ensuing political vacuum was subsequently filled by the nascent Islamist movement in major metropolitan areas. Before the 1991 elections, the RP ended its major rivalry with the MHP by forging a temporary electoral coalition that enabled both parties to cross the 10 percent electoral threshold for entering parliament. In the 1992 local by-elections, RP candidates won surprising victories in Istanbul's low-income religious neighborhoods, such as Kağıthane, Bağcılar, Tuzla, Güngören, and Bahçelievler. In 1994, the RP candidates scored a major electoral breakthrough by winning municipal governments in 28 provinces, including Istanbul and Ankara.<sup>48</sup> The "class of '94" RP mayors merged Islamist cultural practices with neoliberal policies in a pro-business agenda that differed in stark terms from the aforementioned Islamist practices at the local level.<sup>49</sup>

45. Doğan, *Eğreti Kamusalılık* [The makeshift public], 83.

46. Derya Kömürcü, *Türkiye'de Sosyal Demokrasi Arayışı: SODEP ve SHP Deneyimleri* [The search for social democracy in Turkey: The SODEP and the SHP experiences] (Agora Kitaplığı, 2010); Harald Schüller, *Türkiye'de Sosyal Demokrasi: Particilik, Hemşehrilik, Alevilik*, trans. Yılmaz Tonbul [Social democracy in Turkey: Partisanship, fellow countrymen associations, Alevism] (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1999).

47. Ugur Akinci, "The Welfare Party's Municipal Track Record: Evaluating Islamist Municipal Activism in Turkey," *The Middle East Journal* 53, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 78–79, [www.jstor.org/stable/4329285](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4329285).

48. Akinci, "The Welfare Party's Municipal Track Record," 78.

49. For examples, see Jenny B. White, *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011); Doğan, *Eğreti Kamusalılık* [The makeshift public]. On neoliberal populism, see Ziya Öniş, "Turgut Özal and His Economic Legacy: Turkish Neo-Liberalism in Critical Perspective," *Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 4 (July 2004): 113–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263200410001700338>.

The most famous of the RP class of '94 was Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the newly elected mayor of Istanbul. Erdoğan emerged as a model for other RP mayors after using his formidable political machine and the city's sizable budget to establish patronage ties with businessmen, operate municipality companies, and distribute social assistance to the urban poor. The distribution of social assistance in a partisan manner honed the RP's image among low-income citizens in metropolitan areas, just as the party's mayors had begun their organized campaign against unionized municipal workers. Indeed, RP mayors purged thousands of workers — particularly those who refused to join Hak-İş and its subsidiary sectoral unions — from municipal payrolls to make room for their party members and to minimize labor costs.<sup>50</sup> In Istanbul's Kağıthane District alone, the RP mayor laid off 340 municipal workers who waged a highly publicized protest campaign.<sup>51</sup> Levels of social assistance rose steadily under the RP municipal rule, but its distribution mechanisms lacked transparency due to being handled in a discretionary and partisan manner by Islamic charities linked with RP politicians.<sup>52</sup>

In pushing for this transformation at the local level, RP mayors shifted the provision of some public services to politically connected subcontractors, which created a strong fusion between political and economic elites in the Islamist camp. Those religious businessmen in turn became loyal supporters of the pro-business RP politicians who rivaled the Islamist old guard led by the long-time Milli Görüş leader, Erbakan. These mayors became instrumental in laying the groundwork for an extensive grassroots movement linking municipal governments, religious movements and charities, civil society organizations, and professional associations around a conservative political project that eventually gave birth to the Justice and Development Party (AKP).<sup>53</sup> In her detailed study of Islamic mobilization in Turkey since the beginning of the multi-party period, political scientist Ceren Lord showed the extent to which the "religious field" expanded to envelop finance, education, and social welfare provision.<sup>54</sup> By contrast, Islamist penetration of labor and trade unions did not go deep.

The AKP's rise to power took place under extraordinary circumstances caused by the political fallout from the 2001 economic crisis. The Turkish government's implementation of harsh austerity measures led to the downfall of an entire caste of the country's established politicians in the 2002 general elections, paving the way for a political realignment. Against this backdrop, Erdoğan and his colleagues parted ways with their aging boss, Erbakan, and established the AKP, a formidable political force that claimed victory in the 2002 elections. Initially, Erdoğan and his colleagues were at pains to emphasize their differences from Erbakan's Milli Görüş movement. Indeed, between 2002 and 2007, AKP elites insisted on being called "conservative democrats"<sup>55</sup> and their pro-European Union policies, conciliatory approach to the

50. Doğan, *Mahalledeki AKP* [AKP in the neighborhood], 186; Doğan, *Eğreti Kamusalılık* [The makeshift public], 216.

51. Doğan, *Mahalledeki AKP* [AKP in the neighborhood], 142–44.

52. Doğan, *Eğreti Kamusalılık* [The makeshift public], 86.

53. Baykan, *Justice and Development Party*; Doğan, *Mahalledeki AKP* [AKP in the neighborhood].

54. Lord, *Religious Politics in Turkey*, 163–208.

55. William Hale and Ergun Özbudun, *Islamism, Democracy and Liberalism in Turkey: The Case of the AKP* (London: Routledge, 2009).

Cyprus dispute, and fiscal prudence generated popular support at home and garnered international praise.<sup>56</sup> The favorable economic climate after the 2001 crisis also helped the party expand its popular base to include many workers. Once in power, the AKP increased public spending on health and education programs and managed to lower poverty and inequality rates substantially.<sup>57</sup> As voters attributed this “inclusive growth” pattern to AKP policies, the party vastly improved its support among the urban poor and industrial workers.<sup>58</sup>

In its first years in power, the AKP government pursued neoliberal economic policies centered on financial liberalization, privatization, and deregulation of the labor market.<sup>59</sup> When it came to labor rights, the party followed the path first introduced by Turgut Özal’s Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*). For example, in 2003, the AKP government successfully pushed for the controversial Labor Law No. 4857, which transferred more power to employers and eroded job security.<sup>60</sup> Although the 2012 Law on Trade Unions and Collective Bargaining (Law No. 6356) was an improvement on the military-made legislation and brought Turkey closer to the conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the European Social Charter, it nonetheless fell short of similar legislation in the EU and many other countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).<sup>61</sup>

These new laws facilitated the growing use of semi-formalization (*taşeronlaşma*) and other flexible employment schemes in the workplace, especially in the service sector.<sup>62</sup> This decision to institutionalize flexibility was driven by the AKP government’s goal of creating a low-cost and reliable labor force for small- and medium-sized businesses.<sup>63</sup> Due to low salaries and similarly low levels of job security, these workers became dependent on national and local governments for jobs, public services, and social assistance. Growing financialization of the Turkish economy, which provided low-income families with easy access to credit, further increased workers’ dependency on the AKP government.<sup>64</sup> Forced to rely on credit card loans to cover

56. Sebnem Gumuscu, “The Emerging Predominant Party System in Turkey,” *Government and Opposition* 48, no. 2 (Apr. 2013): 234–36, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2012.13>.

57. Dorchach, “Prospects of Egalitarian Capitalism,” 527–30; Ziya Öniş, “The Triumph of Conservative Globalism: The Political Economy of the AKP Era,” *Turkish Studies* 13, no. 2 (2012): 140–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2012.685252>; Gumuscu, “Emerging Predominant Party System,” 232–33.

58. Ali Çarkoğlu, “Economic Evaluations vs. Ideology: Diagnosing the Sources of Electoral Change in Turkey, 2002–2011,” *Electoral Studies* 31, no. 3 (Sept. 2012): 519, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2012.02.005>.

59. Öniş, “Triumph of Conservative Globalism,” 138–42.

60. Çelik, “Turkey’s New Labour Regime,” 623–24.

61. Rucan Işık and Annie van Wezel, “Trade Union Rights Situation in Turkey” (report, EU-Turkey Joint Consultative Committee, November 7–8, 2013); Aziz Çelik, “Trade Union Rights in Turkey: A Gloomy Picture,” *International Union Rights* 23, no. 1 (2016): 3–5. <https://doi.org/10.14213/inteunionigh.23.3.0003>.

62. Bozkurt-Güngen, “Labour and Authoritarian Neoliberalism,” 230–33; Dorchach, “Prospects of Egalitarian Capitalism,” 536.

63. Çelik, “Turkey’s New Labour Regime,” 624.

64. Basak Kus, “Financial Citizenship and the Hidden Crisis of the Working Class in the ‘New Turkey,’” *Middle East Report* no. 278 (Spring 2016): 42–43; Bozkurt-Güngen, “Labour and Authoritarian Neoliberalism,” 228.

their needs, workers were trapped in a vicious debt cycle. Due to their long-term debts, these workers were compelled to support the government for the provision of jobs and low interest rates.<sup>65</sup>

To boost employment in the private sector, the AKP government also provided employers hiring subsidies and rarely enforced safety regulations.<sup>66</sup> As a result, work-related accidents and deaths skyrocketed, especially in construction and mining sectors. Between 2000 and 2012, 12,686 workers died in work-related accidents. This problem gained even more attention in the wake of the 2014 Soma mining disaster, which left 301 workers dead.<sup>67</sup> Finally, during the state of emergency in 2016–18, the AKP government increasingly resorted to postponing labor strikes on grounds of national security as the regime became more authoritarian.<sup>68</sup>

These steps enabled the ruling party to attain “forced harmony in industrial relations” that resulted in a sharp reduction of labor rights and de-unionization.<sup>69</sup> The AKP targeted independent labor unions and went to great lengths to prevent workers from mobilizing to make collective demands. For instance, in 2009, protests by former workers of the privatized TEKEL tobacco and alcohol company were repressed by police in downtown Ankara,<sup>70</sup> and Istanbul’s symbolically important Taksim Square was closed for May Day celebrations. Meanwhile, endorsing a policy of what it called symbiotic unionism, the AKP propped up pro-government trade union confederations such as Hak-İş and the Confederation of Public Servants Trade Unions (*Memur Sendikaları Konfederasyonu* or Memur-Sen), whose ranks expanded by approximately 1,450 percent during the party’s first decade in power.<sup>71</sup> In line with the ruling party, Hak-İş maintained its pro-privatization stance in this period and even sought partnership with communities and business associations to benefit from this process.<sup>72</sup>

Thanks to its control over vast public resources in major cities, the AKP was able to appeal directly to their inhabitants with a conservative agenda that merged religious themes with targeted social assistance.<sup>73</sup> This enabled the government to cushion the negative impact of its neoliberal policies and to co-opt popular constituencies such as the urban poor, workers, and Kurds.<sup>74</sup> Public tenders of massive proportions were

65. Elif Karacimen, “Financialization in Turkey: The Case of Consumer Debt,” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 16, no. 2 (2014): 173–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2014.910393>.

66. Bozkurt-Güngen, “Labour and Authoritarian Neoliberalism,” 231.

67. Fuat Ercan and Şebnem Oğuz, “From Gezi Resistance to Soma Massacre: Capital Accumulation and Class Struggle in Turkey,” *Socialist Register* 51, no. 1 (2015): 116, 118.

68. Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu, “The Perils of ‘Turkish Presidentialism,’” *Review of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 1 (Apr. 2018): 43–53. <https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2018.10>.

69. A. Çelik, “Trade Unions and Deunionization during Ten Years of AKP Rule,” in *Perspectives: Political Analysis and Commentary from Turkey*, ed. Yücel Göktürk, trans. Barış Yıldırım et. al (Istanbul: Heinrich Böll Stiftung Turkey, 2013), 47.

70. Nuray Türkmen, *Eylemden Öğrenmek: TEKEL Direnişi ve Sınıf Bilinci* [To learn from action: The TEKEL resistance and class consciousness] (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2012).

71. Çelik, “Trade Unions and Deunionization,” 47.

72. Blind, *Democratic Institutions of Undemocratic Individuals*, 106.

73. Buğra and Candaş, “Change and Continuity,” 511–12; İpek Göçmen, “Religion, Politics and Social Assistance in Turkey: The Rise of Religiously Motivated Associations,” *Journal of European Social Policy* 24, no. 1 (2014): 97–99, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928713511278>.

74. Öniş, “Triumph of Conservative Globalism,” 141–42; Yörük, “Welfare Provision as Political Containment,” 536.

awarded to pro-AKP business groups and, in turn, those businessmen were “requested” to donate a part of their profits to AKP-affiliated charities.<sup>75</sup> Vast numbers of Turkish workers, effectively de-unionized and often not covered by a social security system, were integrated into this non-transparent welfare system under AKP rule. Carried out by a coalition of AKP elites and the pious bourgeoisie led by the Independent Industrialists’ and Businessmen’s Association (*Müstakil Sanayici ve İşadamları Derneği* or MÜSİAD), this ambitious political project received vital ideational support from those we term *neoliberal ulema*.

### *ULEMA IN THE NEOLIBERAL ERA: REPRESENTATIVES OF STATE AND BUSINESS INTERESTS*

The Turkish word *ulema* is derived from the Arabic word *‘ulama*, referring to Islamic scholars who interpret shari‘a and respond to questions posed by Muslims with a fatwa (Turkish, *fetva*). During the Ottoman Empire, ulema were important opinion leaders and a political class of their own, educated in religious schools known as madrasas (*medreseler* in Turkish). From the sixteenth century through the twentieth, sultans officially designated a prominent alim (i.e., a single member of the ulema) as the *şeyhülislam* (from the Arabic *shaykh al-Islam*), who would issue fatwas and give religious approval on all important executive decisions. Accordingly, the Ottoman constitution of 1876 made the *şeyhülislam* an ex officio member of the imperial cabinet. As part of the early republic’s secularization reforms, the *şeyhülislam*’s office, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and the madrasas were closed down in 1924, bringing the era of ulema as political actors to an end. While some continued to operate in underground madrasas, ulema in the classical mold have been replaced with personnel of the Directorate of Religious Affairs and professors at schools of theology in public universities. These professionals serve as today’s ulema, albeit, in a secular setting.<sup>76</sup>

In comparison to other themes of shari‘a, very little attention has been paid by contemporary ulema to problems of the modern working class, mainly due to a major structural problem. Codified before modernity, the main body of shari‘a is represented by fairly rigid and distinctive schools of legal thought that are followed by the majority of practicing Muslims.<sup>77</sup> Ulema interpreted verses of the Qur’an and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and developed the legal literature in a pre-industrial Muslim world, where cities were few and urban populations very small and limited to small-scale merchants and craftsmen. Because ulema responded to questions arising from those traditional communities, shari‘a has in turn been shaped largely by the values of peasant and nomadic societies. Classical Islamic legal literature that deals with labor questions is limited under

75. Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu, “Building a Competitive Authoritarian Regime: State-Business Relations in the AKP’s Turkey,” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 20, no. 4 (2018): 359–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2018.1385924>; Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu, “Why Did Turkish Democracy Collapse? A Political Economy Account of AKP’s Authoritarianism,” *Party Politics* 27, no. 6 (2021): 1075–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068820923722>.

76. For a detailed discussion on Turkish ulema, see Lord, *Religious Politics in Turkey*, 79–126.

77. Aziz Al-Azmeh (ed.), *Islamic Law: Social and Historical Contexts* (London: Routledge, 1988); Wael B. Hallaq, *Shari‘a: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).



those circumstances. Collections of fatwas on ritual purity, for instance, are far more extensive than those on worker-employer relations. Furthermore, all labor-related questions were subsumed under the shari‘a concepts of contracts (*akitler*) and lease (*icar*), expanding and diluting the meaning of the term “worker” to include practitioners of free professions such as doctors, engineers, and architects.<sup>78</sup> Consequently, Turkish ulema lacked a comprehensive Islamic framework and terminology to address the complicated questions arising from the rapid industrialization the country underwent in the 1960s.

As a professional group, the ulema have been making a serious comeback since the 1960s in terms of visibility, increased activism, and social prestige, a trend which runs parallel to the rise of the far right in Turkey. However, they were totally unprepared and ill-equipped to develop a comprehensive stance on labor rights in accordance with pre-modern Islamic law for Turkish workers uprooted from traditional communities and transplanted in alien and unwelcoming industrialized urban areas. A small number of labor-friendly ulema dared to justify previously un-Islamic but pro-labor practices as part of a new set of workers’ rights. To give one example, when asked in 1967 by the chief mufti of Istanbul to prepare a treatise on worker and employer rights in Islam, religious studies teacher Musa Çakır claimed that, even though the concept of a strike does not exist in Islam, labor strikes were going to become a necessary measure because “poor people and workers are being exploited by their employers against Islamic teachings.”<sup>79</sup> Likewise, Ahmet Şahin, a one-time deputy mufti of Istanbul’s Fatih District, argued that it would be unfair to advise workers to search for another job if they could not survive on low pay. “It is well-known,” Şahin maintained, “that, faced with the nightmare of unemployment in our country, the worker must often accept a salary, which is not enough to make ends meet.”<sup>80</sup> For the same reason, workers were forced not to complain when employers withheld payment of social security premiums or, worse, when workers had no social security at all.<sup>81</sup> Both Çakır and Şahin represented the possibility of a new turn in the Turkish interpretation of workers’ rights in Islamic law.

However, a very different set of conditions from the 1950s onward prevented Turkish ulema from developing a more labor-friendly interpretation of shari‘a.<sup>82</sup> The political empowerment of the working class and Cold War dynamics each presented a serious challenge to both Turkish political elites and the ulema. Bullied by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin after the end of World War II, Turkey joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952 and became a buffer zone between the Soviet Union and the Middle East. Many Turks were inclined to regard socialism in the country as a fig leaf for Soviet expansionism. Indeed, from the perspective of Turkish state elites, right-wing politicians, and the intelligentsia, the rise of the Turkish left was nothing but a new stage in the 300-year old rivalry with Russia. Working class activists were thus perceived as serving Soviet/Russian interests, knowingly or unknowingly, as a

78. Chafik Chehata, “Akd,” and E. Tyan, “Idjar, Idjara,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second edition, ed. P. Bearman et al. (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1986), 318–20, 1017.

79. Musa Çakır, *Çalışmak İbadettir: İslam’da İşçi ve İşverenin Hakkı* [To work is to worship: Labor and employer rights in Islam] (Istanbul: Üçdal Neşriyat, 1967), 47–50.

80. Ahmet Şahin, *İslam’da İşçi ve İşveren Hakları* [Labor and employer rights in Islam] (Istanbul: Yaylacık Matbaası, 1972), 71.

81. Şahin, *İslam’da İşçi ve İşveren Hakları* [Labor and employer rights in Islam], 71.

82. Aytürk, “Türkiye’de Uç Sağ ve Emek” [“The far right and labor in Turkey”], 14–16.

fifth column to topple the only independent Turkic nation in the world — while other Turkic peoples were living under Communist rule in the Soviet Union and China or as minorities in the Middle East.<sup>83</sup>

Turkish ulema were enthusiastic members of this anti-left coalition in the struggle against Soviet expansionism. As early as the Korean War in 1950, for instance, the Democrat Party government had recruited the Directorate of the Religious Affairs to condemn “atheist communists.”<sup>84</sup> Ulema’s books and treatises on labor rights spared one or two pages to criticize the liberal/capitalist world order and said it would not bring happiness to humanity.<sup>85</sup> However, these same books and treatises would go on to comprehensively denounce the “empty” promises of Marxism and described with great detail and relish the poverty and immorality that occurred under Communist regimes.<sup>86</sup> One alim in particular, Cemalettin Kaplan, the former mufti of Adana and later a political refugee and self-declared caliph in Germany, urged his colleagues to warn all Muslims that “the philosophy called communism is incompatible with religion, and that, furthermore, it is a ruthless enemy of religion, that a Muslim should not be a communist, and if he nevertheless chooses that path, this must be considered an act of apostasy.”<sup>87</sup> Kaplan was not a lonely eccentric on this matter; on the contrary, he was joined by the vast majority of Turkish ulema in condemning all shades of socialism as irreligious.

Secondly, Cold War realities also exposed the somber reality that Turkey could not stand alone on the fault line separating the two superpowers. Turkey was still lagging in terms of military power, economic capacity, industrial output, and human development. For Turkish ulema, this was both unfathomable and shameful. In their eyes, this was incompatible with the ever-victorious image of Islam and had to be remedied. Therefore, Turkish ulema championed the idea of a strong state whose military and economic might would stand as a symbol of the glory of Islam. The need to defend and strengthen the Turkish state overrode all other individual, group, and institutional interests. Everything else could be sacrificed if it helped upgrade the status of the Turkish state in the international system.

For these reasons, ulema did not endorse the various left-wing paths to speedy development that held sway over secular Turkish intellectuals at the time. Instead, they adopted a national-developmental approach. Accordingly, ulema emphasized that it was an Islamic duty for all Muslim Turks to act in solidarity with the interests of the

83. Cangül Örneç, *Türkiye'nin Soğuk Savaş Düşünce Hayatı: Antikomünizm ve Amerikan Etkisi* [History of thought in Cold War Turkey: Anti-Communism and the American influence] (Istanbul: Can Yayınları, 2015).

84. Nadav Solomonovich, “The Turkish Republic’s Jihad? Religious Symbols, Terminology and Ceremonies in Turkey during the Korean War 1950–1953,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 54, no. 4 (2018): 594–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2018.1448273>.

85. Çakır, *Çalışmak İbadettir* [To work is to worship], 41–42; Şahin, *İslam’da İşçi ve İşveren Hakları* [Labor and employer rights in Islam], 81–82; Cemalettin Kaplan, *İslam’da İşçi ve İşveren Münasebetleri* [Worker and employer relations in Islam] (Elif Matbaa, 1972), 104–5; Hayrettin Karaman, *İslam’da İşçi-İşveren Münasebetleri* [Worker-employer relations in Islam] (Istanbul: Marifet Yayınevi, 1981), 72–75.

86. Şahin, *İslam’da İşçi ve İşveren Hakları* [Labor and employer rights in Islam], 82–85; Kaplan, *İslam’da İşçi ve İşveren Münasebetleri* [Worker and employer relations in Islam], 106–22; Karaman, *İslam’da İşçi-İşveren Münasebetleri* [Worker-employer relations in Islam], 78.

87. Kaplan, *İslam’da İşçi ve İşveren Münasebetleri* [Worker and employer relations in Islam], 122.

Turkish state and offer their resources for the consolidation of state power. Ulema chose to interpret religious law in such a way that allowed for state interests to tower over the interests of individual Muslims or Muslim collectivities. If there seemed no other way but to industrialize as quickly as possible to be able to stand up against already-industrialized non-Muslim rivals, then no obstacle could be allowed to get in the way of industrialization. Because they held capital and the know-how, corporate groups received preferential treatment and were regarded as natural partners of the state in this quest, while everyone else, including the working class, was expected to moderate their demands. Ultimately, individual and group interests could not be more important than the glory of Islam, which was pegged to the power of the Turkish state. Kaplan, for instance, advised workers to be content with their legal rights, not to ask for very high salaries that might jeopardize their workplaces, not to criticize the wealth and income of their employers, and not to pay attention to the “evil counsel” of Communists. Moreover, he urged workers to love their employers as fellow Muslim brothers.<sup>88</sup> Çakır, who was otherwise more forthcoming in understanding workers’ grievances, did not want their rights to obstruct Turkey’s development:

[The right to] strike and lockout must be hanging by a thread just like the sword of Damocles [to be used very sparingly]. Unfortunately, in less-developed countries like ours, strikes and lockouts are always used for destructive activities and for illegitimate aims. . . . When going on a strike . . . one should never forget the harm caused to national income.<sup>89</sup>

Even Hüseyin Atay, a well-respected University of Ankara theologian who had a reputation as a reformist alim, ruled that workers could not compel their employers to pay higher wages by threatening them with a strike.<sup>90</sup>

Due to the emphasis placed on upholding the Turkish state, ulema in general spoke against workers’ unions pursuing political aims. Instead they emphasized Islamic law as the only guiding principle for the working class. In an important 1981 treatise on worker-employer relations, Islamic law professor Hayrettin Karaman ruled that if a worker expects higher pay and this is not accepted by their employer, then both may apply to an Islamic ombudsman or a religious court. If the worker’s claim for higher pay is refused, then they must either continue with the same salary or quit their job. According to Karaman’s interpretation, the worker may not strike because that would be in contravention of the Islamic understanding of a contract, which ought to be based on mutual consent as defined by shari‘a.<sup>91</sup>

Interestingly, when pronouncing their fatwas, Turkish ulema did not speak from within the current reality of states in Muslim-populated countries but rather abstractly referred to an idealized Islamic state of the prophetic era and the early caliphates. Keeping alive the hope that such a state could one day be resurrected, many ulema had total

88. Kaplan, *İslam’da İşçi ve İşveren Münasebetleri* [Worker and employer relations in Islam], 123–24.

89. Çakır, *Çalışmak İbadettir* [To work is to worship], 47–50.

90. Hüseyin Atay, *İslam’da İşçi-İşveren İlişkileri* [Worker-employer relations in Islam] (Ankara: Kısım Matbaası, 1979), 44–45.

91. Karaman, *İslam’da İşçi-İşveren Münasebetleri* [Worker and employer relations in Islam], 74–75.

faith in its resourcefulness and ability to solve any problem. This perfect Islamic state, ulema claimed, would be superior to both capitalist and socialist economic systems, being both an active, major participant in market relations and a quintessential social state that cares and provides for the poor. However, this ideal state would not aim to achieve full social equality, since that is against the Islamic concept of justice.<sup>92</sup> It would only be obliged to make sure that all Muslims have basic standards of living and muster all the resources at its disposal to leave no one without food or shelter. If workers were to suffer from this unequal relationship with their employers, then the state would be expected to step in to assume full responsibility for their basic needs. Therefore, under an Islamic government, workers — not as a class but as Muslims who sell their labor — would have no reason to complain from injustice nor would they need to seek better standards through trade unions or labor strikes. With their focus on workers, ulema ignored the risk that business interests might pose to the general welfare, especially if the Turkish state, secular or Islamic, began to take them more seriously.

Such expectations stemmed from the assumption that a future Islamic state would be neutral and above class interests. This assumption flew in the face of more than 100 years of leftist critiques of the state, which ulema did not seem to have been cognizant of. Furthermore, in the absence of such an ideal state or even Islamic courts, workers were left with no protection, a situation where fatwas catered essentially to a group of religious businessmen that were accumulating capital through flexible employment practices. As Ceren Lord emphasized, in the post-1980 period, pro-business ulema played their part by issuing fatwas that legitimized exactly this kind of a worker-employer relationship from an Islamic perspective.<sup>93</sup> Fatwas by Hayrettin Karaman, who is said to have advised Recep Tayyip Erdoğan regularly, are especially illuminating in this regard.<sup>94</sup> In his aforementioned 1981 treatise, Karaman did not permit workers to strike and even opposed their right to demand adjustment to their wages to offset the depreciation of the Turkish lira due to inflation. He preached that workers should be under the protection of the hypothetical Islamic state, which would compensate their losses in any case.<sup>95</sup> When no such state exists, however, Karaman's fatwa left the workers unprotected against an inflationary economy. Likewise, he also found social security programs and pension plans to be un-Islamic, being based on fixed premiums paid by both workers and employers. Instead, Karaman ruled that the Islamic state should step in when a retired worker could not make ends meet.<sup>96</sup>

Coupled with his leadership in bringing interest-free Islamic banking to Turkey later in the 1980s, Karaman personally symbolizes this generation of business-friendly ulema. These scholars cared more for the interests of business than labor and

92. Atay, *İslam'da İşçi-İşveren İlişkileri* [Worker-employer relations in Islam], 54; Çakır, *Çalışmak İbadettir* [To work is to worship], 3–10; Karaman, *İslam'da İşçi-İşveren Münasebetleri* [Worker and employer relations in Islam], 54.

93. Lord, *Religious Politics in Turkey*, 119, 202.

94. For more of Karaman's fatwas, see the page entitled "Sorulan Konular" ("question topics") on his website at <http://hayrettinkaraman.net/konular/index.htm>.

95. Karaman, *İslam'da İşçi-İşveren Münasebetleri* [Worker and employer relations in Islam], 54, 74–75. Also see Karaman's comments in Abdülvehhab Öztürk et al., *İslam'da Emek ve İşçi-İşveren Münasebetleri* [Labor in Islam and worker-employer relations] (İstanbul: Ensar Neşriyat 1986), 145–52.

96. Karaman, *İslam'da İşçi-İşveren Münasebetleri* [Worker and employer relations in Islam], 59–61.

used their fatwas to legitimize the practices of the rising Anatolian bourgeoisie. Their fatwas attempted to mitigate class conflict through Islamic references that appealed to Muslim workers and brought together entrepreneurs and their employees around a religious ethos.<sup>97</sup> In turn, MÜSIAD was willing to team up with these ulema to publicize their pro-business views. Since 2002, the AKP has maintained a near monopoly over Islamic institutions in the country, eliminating the possibility of the emergence of a shari‘a-inspired challenge to neoliberalism and capitalism.<sup>98</sup>

It is worth noting that there have been a very small number of Turkish ulema who have refused in principle to jump on the neoliberal bandwagon. These dissidents have chosen to focus on the problems of the underprivileged segments of contemporary society. One prominent alim among them, İhsan Eliaçık, developed a new approach to shari‘a with an egalitarian bent and founded a loosely organized movement called the Anti-Capitalist Muslims (*Antikapitalist Müslümanlar*).<sup>99</sup> Eliaçık was the only alim to express open support for demonstrators during the Gezi Park protests in 2013, which began as a movement resisting the commercialization of a central Istanbul greenspace but spread into a broad uprising against the AKP government. He and his followers were given nationwide coverage as they broke the Ramadan fast in Istanbul’s Taksim Square alongside thousands of secular protesters.<sup>100</sup> However, Eliaçık’s unorthodox views won him many enemies. Not only was he shunned by mainstream ulema but one AKP mayor disinvited him from speaking at a book fair. When Eliaçık appeared at the event nevertheless, he was physically attacked by a mob.<sup>101</sup> Even more active is a group of younger Islamic intellectuals who have set up what they call the Platform on Labor and Justice (*Emek ve Adalet Platformu*), which organizes regular talks and meetings that include both religious and secular leftist and liberal activists. However, Eliaçık, the Platform on Labor and Justice, and other left-wing Muslim intellectuals, journals, and platforms have hardly made an impact on religious Turkish Muslims thus far. Rather, they tend to be confined to secular, left-wing audiences in search of conservative allies against the increasingly authoritarian AKP government.

## CONCLUSION

This article has offered a historical analysis of the Turkish far right’s relationship with the working class since 1960. We claim that both nationalists and Islamists have tried to draw support by appealing to the ethnic and religious identity of workers. This identity

97. Yasin Durak, *Emeğin Tevekkülü: Konya’da İşçi-İşveren İlişkileri ve Dindarlık* [Labor fatalism: Worker-employer relations and piety in Konya] (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2013).

98. Cihan Tuğal, “Fight or Acquisce? Religion and Political Process in Turkey’s and Egypt’s Neo-liberalizations,” *Development and Change* 43, no. 1 (Jan. 2012): 33, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2012.01762.x>.

99. Hazal Özvarış, “Antikapitalist Müslümanlar: Hem Muhafazakar Hem de Sol Kesim Kendisini Sorgulamalı” [Anti-capitalist Muslims: Both conservatives and leftists must question themselves], *T24*, April 30, 2012, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/antikapitalist-muslumanlar-turkiyedeki-muslumanlar-ozur-dilemeli,202763>.

100. “Gezi’nin Ramazan’a Yansıması: Yeryüzü İftarı” [“Gezi’s relection on Ramadan: Breaking the fast collectively”], *BBC*, July 9, 2013, <https://bbc.in/3JhnPNW>.

101. “İhsan Eliaçık’a Kitap Fuarında Saldırı!” [“Attack on İhsan Eliaçık at the book fair”], *Cumhuriyet*, October 21, 2017, [www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/ihsan-eliacika-kitap-fuarinda-saldiri-849805](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/ihsan-eliacika-kitap-fuarinda-saldiri-849805).

politics has defined the far right's relations with Turkish workers throughout the multi-party era, albeit with varied success. Until the 1990s, the two movements failed to counteract leftist parties that appealed to workers through their material interests. Prior to the 1980 coup, leftist parties enjoyed greater popularity with industrial workers who were heavily organized in unions and voted along their economic interests. In turn, the two far-right movements drew support from a small group of workers organized along ethnic or religious lines in the Confederation of Nationalist Workers' Unions (MİSK) and the Confederation of Righteous Workers' Unions (Hak-İş), respectively. Locked in a bitter struggle with the Turkish left, the Nationalist Movement Party (or Nationalist Action Party, MHP) took an early interest in workers, organized more aggressively, and was more successful than the Islamists in obtaining working-class support. However, in the 1980s, the MHP dropped its emphasis on labor issues to focus instead on combating the Kurdish rights movement. However, there was no good explanation for why the MHP could not pursue both strategies. Indeed, radical right-wing populist parties in the West amalgamated a nativist discourse with an anti-free trade agenda to appeal to workers who were the losers of economic liberalization.<sup>102</sup> At a time when leftist parties were in decline and the Islamist movement adopted a pro-business agenda, the MHP did not appeal directly to workers with a nationalist discourse.

The weakness of the Islamist movement among workers began to change in the 1990s, largely due to the shift to a neoliberal economic model after the 1980 coup weakened leftist parties and unions. Simultaneously, rapid urbanization filled major urban centers with conservative voters receptive to the allure of traditionalist identity politics. The popularity of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) among workers was a phenomenon of the 2000s but built upon the type of identity politics exercised by mayors within the Welfare Party (RP) during the previous decade. The critical link between the transformations of the 1970s and the twenty-first-century AKP is provided by the RP, bridging the traditional Islamist old guard from the National Order/Salvation Party (MNP/MSP) and a younger generation of business-friendly politicians. Although the RP's time in national power was cut short, the party cultivated strong ties with both the pious bourgeoisie and the urban poor through its control of municipal governments.

The Islamist movement never acquired a pro-labor platform and chose to subordinate worker issues to larger religious debates. We contend that the AKP's pro-business agenda, which scholars claim to be its defining break with the RP, has deeper roots than otherwise noted. Especially important among our findings is the willingness of ulema to legitimize and justify the pro-state and anti-labor strategies of the Turkish authorities during the Cold War period as a bulwark against the rising Turkish left. From the 1980s onward, important ulema contributed directly to the ideological formation of neoliberal hegemony in Turkey. Neoliberal ulema were particularly useful in camouflaging the tension between Islamist politicians and Islamic capital, on one hand, and religious workers, on the other. As the Islamist movement gained strength in the 1990s, the ulema emerged as a vital actor in bringing together all these social groups behind a common religious-cultural agenda.

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102. Simon Otjes et al., "It's Not Economic Interventionism, Stupid! Reassessing the Political Economy of Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties," *Swiss Political Science Review* 24, no. 3 (Sept. 2018): 270–90. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12302>.