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Turkey 2002: Kemalism, Islamism, and Politics in the Light of the February 28 Process

In the 1990s, Turkish politics witnessed the fragmentation of the political center and the rise of the Islamist Welfare Party (Refah Partisi, or RP) from fringe party to a major partner in the coalition government, Refahyol, it formed with the center-right True Path Party (Doğru Yol Partisi, or DYP) in June 1996. With the benefit of hindsight, one might suggest that the Turkish military took the accession of the RP into government as confirmation of its belief that Islamist reactionism, *irtica* in Turkish, had become a substantial threat to the secular character of the republic. Consequently, on February 28, 1997, the military-dominated National Security Council (NSC) issued the Refahyol coalition government with a list of measures designed to nullify the supposed Islamization of Turkey and fortify the secular system. Subsequent pressure from the NSC, in tandem with the civilian component of the secular establishment, led to the collapse of the coalition government in June 1997.

The ousting of the Refahyol government signaled the start of the military's plan to refashion Turkey's political landscape along Kemalist lines

without actually having to take over power directly. Hence, the phrase “February 28 process” was coined to indicate not only the far-reaching implications of the NSC decisions, but also the suspension of normal politics until the secular correction was completed. This process has profoundly altered the formulation of public policy and the relationship between state and society. No major element of Turkish politics at present can be understood without reference to the February 28 process.

This essay takes issue with three things. First, it seeks to unpack the rationale that underpins the February 28 process and critically assess its impact on Turkish politics and society. Next, it examines the way in which the February 28 process has afforded the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) even greater scope to influence public policy and to do so with virtually no oversight by the civilian constitutional authority. Finally, it addresses the ways in which political Islam has responded to the process.

Reconfiguring Politics

Since the inception of the republic, Kemalism has comprised its guiding vision. It is in essence a Westernizing/civilizing ideology whose incontrovertible maxims are secularism, understood as the separation of religion from political rule; a modern/Western identity and lifestyle; and the cultural homogeneity and territorial unity of the nation. Because the Kemalist Westernization project has relied more on symbols than substance, it has associated publicly visible instances of Islamic identity with reactionism. The ideology is also marked by a visible distaste for politics as a societal activity, and an ambivalent attitude toward the notion of popular legitimacy. Over time, it has been adjusted, at times stalled, but never abandoned or discontinued. Even if the TAF has at times deployed the Kemalist doctrine to suit its own agenda, its basic tenets have not lost their power of appeal and legitimacy both across classes and across the civilian-military divide.

Kemalism Redefined or Entrenched? The architects behind the February 28 process grounded their actions in the need to ensure the “continuity” of the basic assumptions of the Kemalist model. The Turkish military, former President Süleyman Demirel (1993–2000), the civil societal network of the secular establishment, media, and large sectors of the populace believe that Islamic reactionism constitutes the chronic, if at times undetectable,



Demonstration by the Association for Atatürkist Thought. Photo by Arif Aşçı.

malaise of the Turkish polity. The former Chief of General Staff General Hüseyin Kıvrıkoğlu expresses this sentiment: “Radical Islam may appear gone one day to reemerge the next day . . . it is not possible to say that the danger has vanished.”¹ As a result, the secular establishment’s natural reflex is to remain in a permanent state of alert. They also hold that by sticking to a “purist interpretation of the Kemalist bases of the republic,”² civilian politics can be reconstructed so as to ensure continuity of the Kemalist regime and thereby accrue popular support for it.

Contrary to the “neorepublican” policies that prevailed after the post-1980 military rule when elements of Islam were incorporated into public discourse to provide a moral basis, ideological unity, and some certainty in the face of global capitalism,³ the February 28 process seeks to usher back the republic’s radical secularism. That represents a complete reversal from the republican pattern of state-Islam relations that, in the past, allowed for negotiation, compromise, and reconciliation between Turkey’s political Islamists and the establishment.⁴ This time, however, a string of drastic prosecular policy measures were introduced: All primary and secondary school curricula were altered so as to emphasize both the secularist history and character of the republic and the new security threats posed by political Islam and separatist movements. Teaching on Atatürkism was expanded to cover all courses taught at all levels and types of schools.⁵ The secondary school system for prayer-leaders and preachers (*imam hatip*) was scrapped and an eight-year mandatory schooling system was introduced. Appointments of university chancellors since 1997 were pointedly made from among staunch Kemalists. Teaching programs on Kemalist principles, the struggle against reactionism, and national security issues were also extended to top bureaucrats and prayer leaders.⁶ Finally, military institutions and personnel were actively involved in administering the programs.

If we add to these measures the closing of the Islamic parties and the banning of their key policy makers from active politics, it is clear that the architects of the process aim to ensure that the key political players toe the line—namely, comply with the need to both stabilize the rule of the original Kemalist project and revive the myth of a homogenous nation and society. The moralizing mentality that elevates a suprapolitical Kemalism and secularism to the level of a moral consensus of society is clearly exemplified by the deputy chief of general staff: “Countries that could not

create a common value system are by definition in a state of conflict. Our common value is secular and democratic Turkey within the framework of unitarianism and Atatürkist thought. All movements that do not meet with us on this common value are the enemies of the nation and country, and must be fought against.”⁷

The actual dynamics of the process, however, point at a compromise between a zero-sum understanding of Kemalism and the new realities on the ground. In its drive to reassert secularism, the establishment has run into two principal problems: the political resistance put up largely by the center-right Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi, or ANAP), which has been part of all governments since June 1997, and the reforms required if Turkey’s EU membership application is to be successful.

Because Tansu Çiller, the chairwoman of the DYP, had already been sidelined and the RP and its successors were clearly discredited and intimidated, Mesut Yılmaz, the chairman of the ANAP, emerged as the main opposition to the secular establishment’s assessment and justification of the necessity and management of the struggle against *irtica*. The Center-Right’s claim is that *irtica*, like the preceding communist and Kurdish questions, is a pretext to maintain the power, position, and large budget share of the TAF. In taking a critical stand against the TAF over who should fight against Islamic activism and how, Mesut Yılmaz as the prime minister (July 1997–January 1999) repeatedly expressed the view that *irtica* was not the number-one question for Turkey: “It is only if they (Islamists) rebel against the state authority that we would have to assign the task to the TAF.”⁸ This attitude implies that intervention is justified only if there is “clear and present danger,” as opposed to the view that a preemptive strike is required against the *possibility* of Islamic dominance. Yılmaz, who ironically enough was favored by the secular establishment to unite the Center-Right as part of the combat against *irtica*, explicitly accused the high command of trying to reap political gains from the campaign against the Islamists.⁹ Furthermore, he argued that he would act against assertions of Islamic identity publicly only on the basis of court verdicts rather than intelligence reports compiled by the military’s working groups.¹⁰ The underlying conundrum for the Center-Right has been the fear of hurting “genuinely devout Muslims,” the conservative bedrock from which they draw their popular support. Their dilemma lies in the fact that the center-right tradition can neither embrace radical secu-

lar policies, nor reject or ignore the secular state ideology. In other words, as Islam-as-culture is the most important icon of its claim to be “modern,” this tradition simultaneously opposes both politicized Islam and radicalized secularism.

The Center-Right’s challenge against the post-February 28 interpretation of secularism has created some political space to engage the secular establishment in an extended process of protest, warning, defiance, and sometimes cooperation and negotiation. The subsequent story of Turkish political life after 1997 can be said to be a constant stretching of the limits imposed by the February 28 process.

The other issue that has at least partly diluted the force of the war mentality against Islamic activism has been the support for Turkey’s firm commitment to Westernize proffered by the Helsinki European Council’s meeting on December 10–11, 1999. To stave off criticism from prodemocracy circles and the European Union (EU), in the official declaration of the historic NSC meeting on February 28, 1997, the high command justified the intervention by arguing that it upheld Turkey’s commitment to full EU membership and presented secularism as “a guarantee not only for the regime but at the same time of democracy, societal peace and the modern lifestyle.”¹¹ Moreover, pitting the rhetoric of “contemporariness” (a piece of imagery in Turkey that centers around the idea of being Westernlike) against the opposite imagery of “Islamic anachronism” is one way for Ankara to show its endorsement of Western values. In the post-Helsinki era, at least until the Kurdish insurgency was firmly under control, there was also a shift of discourse on the part of the military establishment from a rhetorical language denying violations of democratic norms to an “argumentative rationality” when engaged with its domestic and international critics over specific accusations of democratic deficiencies and human rights violations.¹² The argumentative discourse affirmed the democratic deficiency in Turkey’s political landscape in terms of civil-military relations, individual rights, and the securitization of public life, but tried to justify them on the grounds that, as part of the military’s combat against internal enemies, these measures were “exceptional” and “corrective,” expressing some awareness of the importance of the democracy-centered security architecture in post-Cold War Europe.

However, as the high command is clearly in favor of a controlled entry into the EU, it has simultaneously adopted another discourse claiming that



Street photographer with Atatürk portraits. Photo by Arif Aşçı.

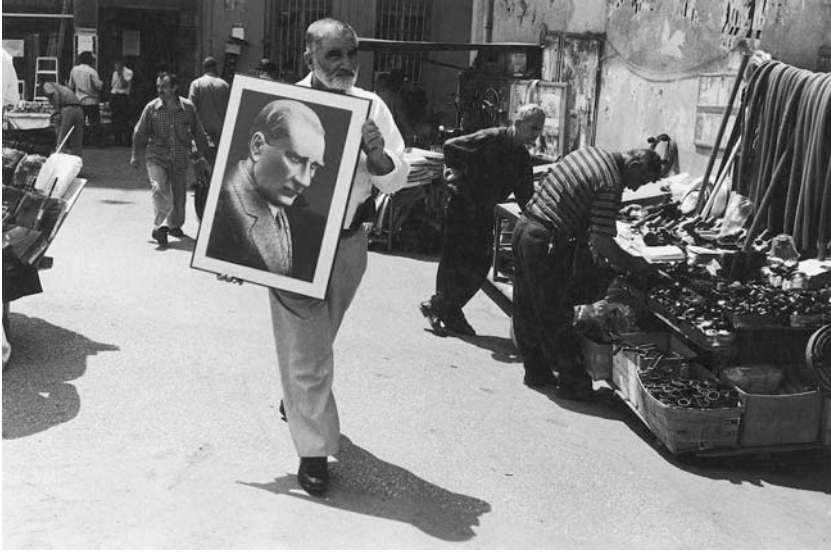
democratic compromises required in order to join the EU would be too high a price to pay for a state committed to countering *irtica* and separatist terror. Thus, accession measures should be accepted only on condition that they do not inflame ethnic differences and provide a breeding ground for Islamic principles. The conservatizing impetus that has followed the September 11 attacks has introduced extra incentives for the Turkish general staff to move toward a more conservative-nationalist position with regard to Ankara's fulfillment of the EU's Copenhagen Criteria. Moreover, the high command is of the opinion that the EU is a bloc that displays a negative bias toward Turkey and will therefore not let her in. Tuncer Kilinc, secretary-general of the NSC, expressed his opinion in early March 2002 that "the EU will never accept Turkey. . . . Thus, Turkey needs new allies, and it would be useful if Turkey engages in a search that would include Russia and Iran."¹³

Implementation: Shaping Turkish Politics. The protagonists of the February 28 intervention saw the roots of political Islam in the "irresponsible" policies of Turkey's political class that uses Islam for partisan purposes and

also in the division of the Center-Right into DYP and ANAP, which was regarded as obstructing the formation of strong, effective, and stable government. Therefore, foremost in their minds was a structural redesign to strengthen Turkey's political center so as to minimize the importance of what they considered the "noncentric" forces of political Islam and establish a center-party majority rule. This objective would be achieved by the bold use of state power to discipline representative institutions, forge the fragmented center around ANAP, and engage the judiciary in wresting control of political power from the RP and its successors by closing them down. In the end, there are two principal aspects of existing politics that can be attributed to the makings of the February 28 process. They are the crystallization of state-friendly features by almost all political persuasions and a pervasive sense of political inertia, both of which have exacerbated the weakness and instability of Turkey's civilian politics.

Gravitating toward the State. The principles that informed the February 28 process have exposed the state-dependent and state-defending characteristics of all representative platforms in Turkey. Turkey's Center-Left, as the founder of official republican politics, has always acted as a force fully complicit with the military-civil bureaucracy in subordinating politics and economics to the logic of secular state power. It has also been badly battered since the 1980s by being outflanked by the free-market rhetoric of the New Right. When it gradually embraced the same agenda rather than articulating welfare-state policies, it lent respectability to neoliberalism. Not surprisingly, since the 1997 intervention, the two center-left parties, the Democratic Left Party (Demokratik Sol Parti, or DSP) of Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit and the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, or CHP) have acted as the agents and defenders of the reconsolidation of nation-state behind the totalizing language of secularism.

Turkey's Center-Right, which also comes from a tradition articulating rural and urban interests that seemingly oppose puritan Kemalism, has gravitated toward a state-centered discourse. This is so because the political discourse of this tradition was built on an ambiguous and fuzzy set of principles encompassing political, economic, and religious liberalism.¹⁴ Those principles allowed the Center-Right to satisfy its power base through the distribution of state largesse while paying lip service to liberal values. The DYP's problems with the February 28 process were over the party's loss



Peddler of Atatürk portraits. Photo by Arif Aşçı.

of power and relegation to the sidelines, rather than based on an ethically motivated opposition to the intervention. The ANAP, locus of power in the 1980s, upheld the free-market ideology without seeing any contradiction between supporting the state-imposed political design of the February 28 process and political and economic liberalism. It was only when the party's alignment with the process was observed to be causing a major electoral slide for the party that it became the major challenger to the new political design.

Since February 28, 1997, Turkish political parties have retreated from a constituency-serving position to a state-supporting one. Neither the rising star of Turkish politics in the 1990s, the nationalist camp represented by the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, or MHP), nor the Islamists can claim to have articulated an alternative democratic political platform that can act as "the significant other." The nationalist MHP and the Islamist parties have failed to formulate a solid political bedrock from which to constructively oppose the moral consensus laid down by the February 28 process. Hence, EU accession has become the only instrumental issue with the power to compel progressive change in the country.

The Politics of Inertia. Despite the vast changes in political, social, economic, and geopolitical realities, the thrust of politics has stagnated since February 28, 1997. The current three-party coalition government comprising the center-right ANAP, the center-left DSP, and the nationalist MHP has been in office longer than any coalition in Turkish history. But the government does not owe its durability to imaginative politics, empathy with the fears and hopes of the masses, and its outward-looking, competitive drive for power. On the contrary, it owes its durability to a new version of the politics of inertia, or bloc-politics, which is promoted by domestic and international business circles to bring stability and inspire confidence in the markets. The core bloc of the government, comprised of ANAP and DSP, first emerged as an alternative to the Refahyol coalition government in 1997. With the inclusion of the conservative-nationalist MHP after it emerged as the second largest party in the April 1999 elections, it was thought that this bloc would bring some stability into politics. The formation and survival of this bloc have also been facilitated by the decline of the Turkish Left as well as by the tacit understanding that there is a de facto military veto against any prospective governments where DYP and RP and their successors can participate.

Given that the bloc politics is basically due to the failure of Turkey's political persuasions, be it on the left or right, to articulate any pattern of thought other than that of defending the status quo, the troika stays in power because it is a government by default. That it stays despite its policy failures — culminating in the most serious economic crash in the history of the republic on February 21, 2001, which effectively forced the government to seek a massive new standby emergency aid package from the International Monetary Fund (thus saddling the Turkish taxpayer with even further international debt) — is a sign of the absence of political synergy or a credible parliamentary alternative, and the officials' abject disregard for the concerns of those they represent.

Moreover, in the absence of a tradition of resigning from public office, Prime Minister Ecevit's refusal to step down, despite his deteriorating health and massive defections from his party in the summer of 2002, plunged the country into a state of political uncertainty.¹⁵ The government could survive only by calling for early elections on November 3, 2002. The EU-required political reforms, necessary to start accession negotiations by the end of this year to qualify Turkey for full membership, could be passed

only thanks to the last-minute initiative of the ANAP, itself desperate to institute the reforms for the elections and thereby avoid political extinction.

It would not be wrong to suggest that the pervasive sense of political inertia in the country and the absence of serious challenges to the extant hierarchy of power is largely a function of a trend in evidence since February 28, 1997, namely, the urge to secure the country against potential threats to the Kemalist doctrine. That outlook has led to the closure of public debate on key issues and caused the existing political class to subcontract the resolution of crucial problems to the civil-military bureaucracy.¹⁶ One writer, in referring to the dominance of the security-first outlook, speaks of a "dual-track government," in which there is a certain division of labor between the TAF and the representative institutions: "It is not that the military has assumed the power of governing; rather, they have set much of the contentious political agenda and then put pressure on the government to enact it. The power of the military (exerted through the NSC) has, in the past two years, increasingly encroached on areas traditionally . . . the prerogative of the nation's elected civilian leaders."¹⁷ Without formally governing, the military's behind-the-scenes maneuvering has successfully managed, perhaps unintentionally, to snuff out any meaningful space for democratic debate and carefully considered renewal.

All in all, the post-February 28 political design has been implemented only to a limited extent, mainly because the problems of political Islam and a fragmented center are seen from a rather mechanical prism and regarded as being alterable by manipulating the technical rules of the game that organize political life. The new model also aimed at promoting stability by enhancing discipline and authority in the public sphere rather than promoting regime capabilities through more effective governance, political legitimacy, and expanded democracy. Considerations of connections between the transformative effects of market policies specific to the countries of the near-periphery and their effect on the empowerment of political Islam are absent. Furthermore, as the "creeping Islamization of Turkey" is attributed to the strategies of irresponsible, weak, inefficient political agents, politics is understood as needing a dose of moral injection in terms of framing public interest as the triumph of the "good" forces against "evil," the victory of secularism against the creeping threat of the Islamization/feudalization of life. The question to address therefore is whether the February 28 process, in steering civilian politics in a particu-



Peddler with picture of the Islamic place of pilgrimage in Mecca. Photo by Arif Aşçı.

lar direction to strengthen center politics and keep Islamic parties out of power, has perilously enhanced the weakness of civilian politics in Turkey.

TAF As Guardians

The Turkish constitutions have not openly proclaimed any guardianship role for the military. However, the esteem with which the military has historically been held and the broad definition of what constitutes a security issue and who defines it¹⁸ means that the realm of influence of TAF goes significantly beyond its counterparts in other democratic societies. It is “not only a professional military organization but a core element of Turkey’s political system,”¹⁹ enjoying a high degree of political and institutional autonomy.²⁰ Backed by that mantle of authority, it is well positioned to pursue its historically mandated guardianship role, a mandate that effectively provides the military with an “ideal for following a political agenda of its own.”²¹

In the 1990s, the TAF has expanded its domain of jurisdiction by redefining the idea of national security.²² By identifying Islamic and Kurdish groups as potential internal enemies, it is effectively able to control the pub-

lic agenda. In doing this, it takes advantage of the privileged powers and position that it has by virtue of its role within the NSC.²³ Hence, the extent of the TAF's influence over public policy has increased, while at the same time the ability of civilians to correct the imbalance in civil-military relations has decreased. Given that the magnitude of the Islamic threat is perceived to be potentially present in all parts of the country and in all sectors of society, national security considerations are now enshrined in legislation on anti-terrorism, media, public order, political parties, education, civil rights, and liberties. The insertion of national security concerns into public policy has significantly altered the meaning of democracy in Turkey by subordinating individual and group rights and liberties to the demands of security. The endorsement of Turkey's candidate status in the Helsinki Summit in 1999, however, acts as the main driving force behind the parliamentary initiative to either modify or repeal the draconian features of national security laws and practices.

Perhaps the most disturbing concern is that what qualifies as an internal defense threat is defined by the military itself. The military sets the standards for measuring and judging the Islamic threat as a life or death question and has created new organizational devices to combat it.²⁴ Especially after the 1995 elections, the TAF has been involved in making and breaking governments, initiating crucial policy decisions, becoming directly involved in political intrigue, issuing public demands and warnings to civilians, structuring new bills through its own research units and departments, launching campaigns to inform the public about the possibility that political Islam might be acting as cover for reactionary intentions, having the final say on whether or not the 1999 elections would be held, shaping foreign policy, and continuously impinging on the daily operations of elected governments.

Consequently, the military is more exposed to charges of partisanship and is more vulnerable to criticisms. Given the fact that the military's traditional "most trusted institution" status was based on its image of being "above politics," one could argue that by remaining in the political arena it weakens the very foundations of its own strength. The increasing intolerance of the military for any criticism or alternative views, which we can observe in the frequency with which the institution responds to what it considers counterpositions taken by public figures, reflects its increasing sense of insecurity about its status. It is perhaps for this reason that the military

aims to construct its own support base by acting like a political party directly addressing the public. However, this strategy feeds back into the weakening of the military's carefully nurtured "above politics" image.

A major element of rupture with the past is the way the military's priority has shifted from invoking societal indifference and fear to producing consent and support. In trying to undermine the RP's popular appeal and create an order characterized by social discipline, centralized authority, and hierarchical integration, the military has been very successful in establishing a new relationship with targeted groups in society. It has appealed directly to the organized groups of the modernized urban-secular sectors—the business world, media, academia, public prosecutors, judges, leaders of civil societal associations—and even held briefing meetings with them to warn of the extent and magnitude of the Islamic threat. The rising salience of civil society for the general staff, however, has not arisen from the search for a free public space, rule of law, limited state power, democratic consensus and compromise over power sharing. On the contrary, there is a widespread belief among the secular-urbanites that the intensity of the Islamic threat may require the suspension of democratic freedoms and limitation of representative principles and institutions. To this end, these sectors have given the TAF a strong hand in crushing what they see as a threat to the regime's existence.

Islamist Politics: Division, Adaptation, and Change

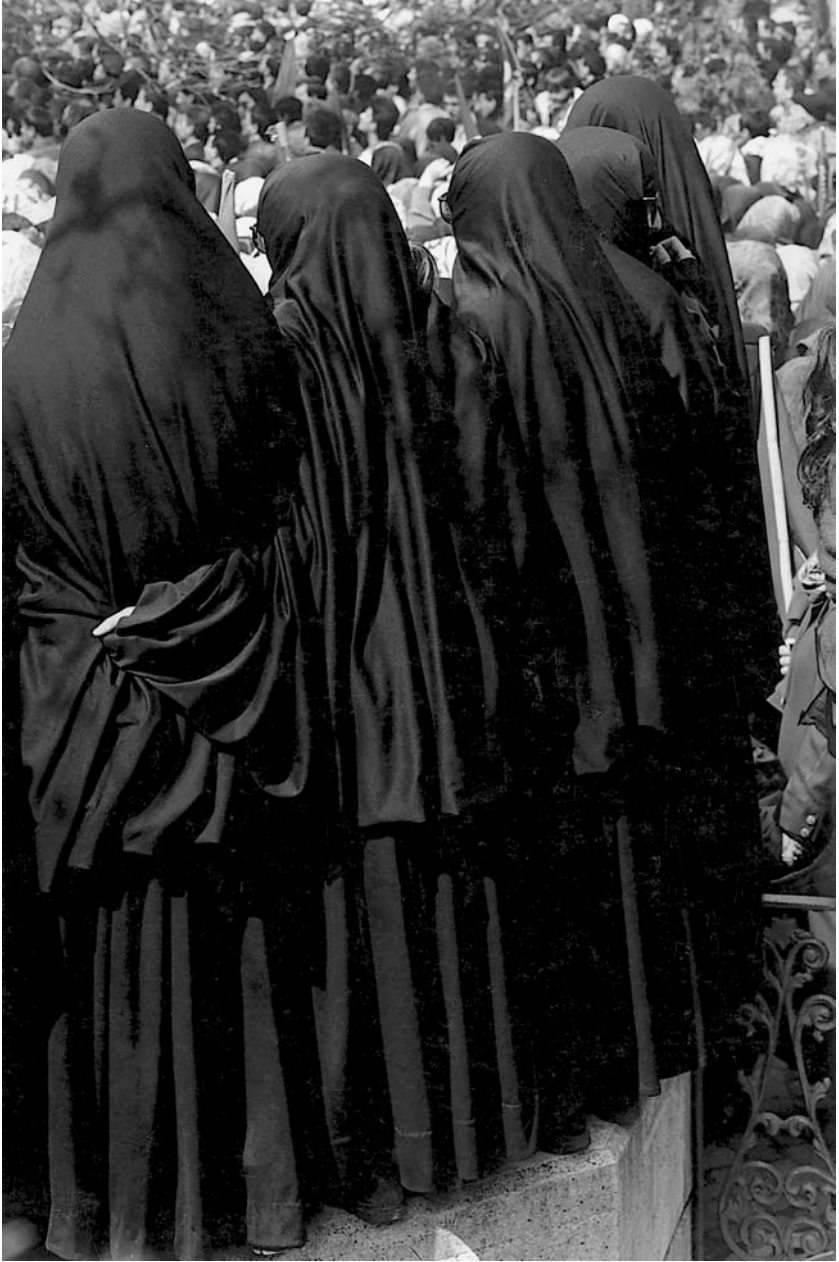
Thus far we have discussed the nature of the February 28 process, the way in which it modified the political landscape, and the way it signaled the military's appropriation of civilian policy making. However, we have yet to consider the way in which the process affected those who were its explicit target, as well as the ways in which they reacted to it. The main target of the process, the RP, was founded in July 1983 as the third political party of the Islamist National Outlook Movement (Milli Gorus Hareketi, or MGH), the expression of Islamism in the political arena since 1970. It was closed down by the Constitutional Court on January 16, 1998, on the grounds that it had become a focal point of antisecular activities. With this closure, a five-year ban on the political activities of its leader, Necmettin Erbakan, and five other top policy makers was imposed. The RP was succeeded by the Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi, or FP, founded in December 1997), again closed down on June 22, 2001, for its antisecular activities and

for violating the constitutional stipulation that a permanently closed party, the RP, cannot be opened again. Although the FP claimed to be a different party than the RP and tried to follow a different political style, until its closure it too was under the questioning eyes of the secularist establishment of Turkey, which charged it with being the new flag bearer of the RP and disguising its reactionary nature from the public.²⁵

What has been the impact of this intimidation on political Islam? The question cannot be answered adequately without reference to the division of the movement into the reformist and traditionalist factions.²⁶ The ban imposed on Erbakan, the founder of the MGH and its authority figure, enabled the FP to break free from his direct influence and enabled the reformists to publicize their discontent with the policies of the traditionalists.²⁷ The movement was eventually divided into two parties after the closure of the FP: the traditionalists' Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi, or SP, founded on July 20, 2001) and the reformists' AKP, founded on August 14, 2001. In what follows we will delineate and discuss the different readings of the February 28 process as reflected by each faction's preferred policies and political styles.

The Traditionalist Wing: Paying Lip Service to Kemalism and Democracy? In terms of their politics, both the RP and the FP tried to adapt themselves to the February 28 process conditions by de-Islamizing their discourse, emphasizing a discourse that avoided any societal tensions, and taking a low-profile, nonconfrontational, and moderate stance. On the basis of what he called "unripe and transitory" conditions, Erbakan rejected the RP's provincial leaders' demands for a strong opposition against the crackdown of the February 28 process.²⁸ Its successor party, FP, also employed a consensus-seeking strategy, expressing no discontent over the undemocratic nature of the crackdown on Islamic identity. Its leader, Recai Kutan, for example, went as far as declaring that "they will not be a party to any conflict"²⁹ and that "they will not bring up the issue of the headscarf even though it is the right thing to do so."³⁰ He even lent some legitimacy to the February 28 process by indicating that they understand the TAF's sensitivity on secularism.³¹ It must be pointed out that this obedient stance was motivated by the FP's massive sense of insecurity—so much so that on that particular point, the party even asked the opinion of the chief of staff about its political program.³²

The FP's acquiescence was redressed by a discourse endorsing democ-



Demonstration against the headscarf ban at the university. Photo by Arif Aşçı.

racism and the idea of a “nonideological state” as the basic principles of the modern world. “We know,” Kutan stated, “what it is like to be threatened, blackmailed, silenced,” and “therefore no one could value democracy better than us.”³³ Before the February 28 process, the Islamist movement saw the false consciousness of the Westernizing elite as Turkey’s basic problem. This elite, it was argued, prevented people’s moral development, which was the prerequisite of economic development and democracy. Erbakan and his team did not question the nonpluralist form of state-society relations, but singled out only the secularist substance of it as a focus of criticism. Moreover, Erbakan’s RP claimed that the MGH represented the true national will of the whole society and appealed to the majoritarian principle to support that conclusion. The RP, therefore, seemed to be willing to utilize the Kemalist legal and political framework, which was instituted to enforce a Western lifestyle by the republican regime, to switch the secular bias of a nonpluralist state-society relationship to one that was Islamic.³⁴ Hence, for example, the idea of making Friday a holiday—as is the case in Islamic societies—was defended not in terms of the right of believers to practice Islam in a democratic context, but rather in terms of the fulfillment of the state’s legal duty to provide religious services within the framework of secularism as drawn by Atatürk.³⁵ Consequently, it was not unthinkable for the secular Turkish public to conceive that the RP posed a threat to their lifestyle.

Although the FP endorsed the idea of a nonideological state, it still maintained its predecessor’s nonpluralist understanding of society. For example, in one of his visits to EU authorities in Brussels, the FP’s pro-Erbakan leader, Kutan, denied that there is a Kurdish problem in Turkey.³⁶ When, on rare occasions, the existence of the Kurdish problem was acknowledged, the FP’s alternative was little more than to uphold the solution once proposed by the RP: relying on the assumption that the real source of identity is Islam, the suggested solution was to strengthen the national and moral values by relaxing the pressures on religion so as to maintain the “community,” rather than a democratic-pluralist restructuring.³⁷ Consequently, the FP’s understanding of democracy was self-servingly restricted to legal and constitutional amendments that would make the closure of the parties difficult and remove the ban on Erbakan’s political activities. As a corollary, instead of pressing for institutional and noninstitutional changes that would make the state nonideological, which was the FP’s declared priority,

the FP used democracy as a window dressing to endear itself to the public in a democracy-dominated age.

According to a distinguished former deputy of the RP, Aydın Menderes, the traditionalists not only lack the ability to carry out radical reforms in the party, but also seem willing to return to the substance and style of politics they conducted in the RP whenever the grip of the February 28 process relaxes.³⁸ Indeed, both Erbakan and Kutan, after the closure of their parties, asserted that they will not change their political stance and ideals, which they believed were correct. The traditionalists' current political party, the SP, not unexpectedly adopts a course of return to the basic tenets of the RP's discourse in a somewhat modified manner.

Lessons the Reformists Drew from the Past. The reformist faction, which eventually formed the AKP under the leadership of the prominent ex-mayor of Istanbul, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, reads the February 28 process and the RP's role in the making of it somewhat differently. Unlike the traditionalists, the reformists are (self-)critical of the political style and policies of the RP, which, they believe, contributed to the February 28 process with its political mistakes.³⁹ For them, the RP's policies reached an impasse because it let religious issues dominate its political agenda, it underplayed the importance of consensus-seeking and dialogue-building with the other sectors of the society, and it did not address itself to a broader public.⁴⁰ As such, the reformist group's moderate discourse seemed to spring from the recognition of the heterogeneous nature of the society. Another conclusion the reformists have drawn from the Refahyol experience is the need to acknowledge the guardianship role of the military in Turkey, which, they considered, should be taken into account as a historical reality. "If we are to be realistic," a leading reformist said, "we should not come up against and clash with the military."⁴¹

The reformists' stated goal was to establish a party that would refrain from employing a rhetorical discourse, would not restrict its political horizon to Islamic issues, would pay special attention to pluralism by building a dialogue with non-Islamist sectors of the society, and would be predictable, dynamic, and open to change, with no hidden agenda on critical issues.⁴² In wanting to bring about the transformation of Islamism, they tried to eliminate what they saw as the root cause of the maladies of the RP, namely the lack of intraparty democracy, self-criticism, and transparency.⁴³



Demonstration/prayer at Beyazıt Square. Photo by Arif Aşçı.

The reformist AKP persistently rejects being Islamist, defines itself as a conservative democratic party, and emphasizes the democratic character of the party organization, its spirit of teamwork, and the importance of consensus-seeking in politics. But since for Erdoğan, politics by definition should take up popular issues and demands related to religious life, the AKP's moderation does not mean that it will not bring religious issues to the political arena,⁴⁴ especially when the AKP's intention to broaden its support base without alienating the traditional constituency of the Islamist movement is taken into account. Hence, for example, it aims to raise the issue of the ban on the wearing of headscarves in educational institutions in the political arena as a matter of basic rights, but not as an issue of religion or religiosity. The AKP cites its attempt to address itself to a broader public while taking up the issues related to public visibility of Islamic identity as evidence of its will to reconcile secularism and Islam through a pluralist public sphere in Turkey. Turkey's secularist establishment, they believe, will respect moderate religiosity in a pro-Islamic party if it refrains from employing a rhetorical discourse and if it maintains a transparent political agenda.

Despite some doubts,⁴⁵ legal pressures, and ambiguities concerning Erdoğan's eligibility to be elected as a member of parliament,⁴⁶ according to almost all opinion polls, the AKP is the most popular party in Turkey. Admittedly, this is due to the AKP's capitalization on the political vacuum created by the immobility of Turkey's existing political contenders. In doing so, the AKP promises a government that will not sacrifice the system's stability and development merely for the sake of acquiring political benefits. In a context in which corruption is rampant and the economy is in severe crisis, such a discourse is appealing. Nevertheless, as it is a promise of "performance" and not a societal vision in which Islam and secularism can be reconciled, such a discourse is more technocratic than political in its outlook.

Conclusion

The political language of the February 28 process presents itself in the form of an ambiguous double discourse. This represents the crisis of epistemology in Kemalist thought. On the one hand, it is correct to say that the central element in the February 28 strategy is the subordination of the present to the past, politics to the market, individual to the wisdom and moral guardianship of the secular establishment, and sociopolitical differences to unity and uniformity. Yet both the establishment and the actors of political Islam, in the process, appropriate a language of holding themselves up as believers in "democracy." Given that the iron rule of Turkish politics is that the practice of democracy is not permitted to have a hallow content but must be rooted in a secular existence, this is hardly surprising. Nor can the logic of power based on the belief that "the confession of secularism is identical with democratic conviction"⁴⁷ be sustained in modern global circumstances in a country struggling to obtain EU membership. Likewise, political Islam provides the mirror image of Kemalism in terms of its conception of democracy not as a hallow notion, but as a totalizing and restrictive sense.

Notes

- 1 "Kıvrıkoğlu: Sinsi İrtica" [Kıvrıkoğlu: Sinister reactionism], *Radikal*, June 14, 2001.
- 2 Heinz Kramer, *A Changing Turkey, the Challenge to Europe and the United States* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), 71.

- 3 Faruk Birtek and Binnaz Toprak, "The Conflictual Agendas of Neo-Liberal Reconstruction and the Rise of Islamic Politics in Turkey," *Praxis International* 13,2 (1993): 192–212.
- 4 Ümit Cizre Sakallıoğlu, "Parameters and Strategies of Islam-State Interaction in Republican Turkey," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28 (1996): 231–51.
- 5 "Atatürkçülük Her Derste Okutulacak" [Atatürkism is going to be taught in all courses], *Hurriyet*, June 27, 1998.
- 6 "Yönetici Memura İnkılap Tarihi Dersi" [History of the republic course (given) to top bureaucrats], *Milliyet*, December 12, 1995.
- 7 "GATA Açılışında Laiklik Uyarısı" [Secularism warning in the opening ceremony of GATA (Gülhane Military Medicine Academy)], *Radikal*, October 2, 2001.
- 8 "Yılmaz'dan Askere Sınır" [Yılmaz constrains the officers], *Radikal*, July 11, 1998.
- 9 "Hükümetin Zor Günleri" [Hard days for the government], *Milliyet*, March 14, 1998.
- 10 "Yılmaz: Komutanların Hakkıdır" [Yılmaz: It is the right of the commanders], *Sabah*, March 21, 1998.
- 11 Muzaffer Şahin, *MGK, 28 Şubat Öncesi ve Sonrası* [NSC, before and after February 28] (Ankara: Ufuk Kitabevi, 1998), 77.
- 12 We borrow the idea that at one stage of internalization of human rights norms, there is a move from "rhetorical discourse" to an "argumentative rationality," from Thomas Risse and Kathryn Sikkink. The significant component in this move is that the logic of argumentation over human rights violations in public entraps the political class in its own rhetoric, enabling them to move toward a true dialogue. See Thomas Risse and Kathryn Sikkink, "The Socialization of International Human Rights Norms into Domestic Practices: Introduction," in *The Power of Human Rights, International Norms and Domestic Change*, ed. Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 2–3.
- 13 Jon Gorravett, "Turkish Military Fires Warning Shot over EU Membership," *Middle East*, no. 323 (2002): 33.
- 14 Ümit Cizre, "Liberalism, Democracy and the Turkish Center-Right: The Identity Crisis of the True Path Party," *Middle Eastern Studies* 32.2 (1996): 142–61; and Ümit Cizre, "From Ruler to Pariah: The Life and Times of True Path Party," in *Political Parties in Turkey*, ed. Barry Rubin and Metin Heper (London: Frank Cass, 2002), 82–101.
- 15 The political crisis deepened when Foreign Minister İsmail Cem, six other ministers, and about seventy defected deputies left Ecevit's party to launch a new party on July 12, 2002, in defiance of Ecevit's refusal to step aside and name a successor. Kemal Derviş, the former minister of state and the overseer of the ongoing IMF-designed stabilization program, was expected to join in the new movement, which later became the New Turkey Party. Until Derviş's declaration in mid-August 2002 that he would not join the New Turkey Party, the initiative was hailed by Turkey's secular establishment and business and international circles as potentially capable of stemming the tide of the Islamic Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, or AKP) and speeding up the process of starting Turkey's accession talks with the EU.
- 16 Menderes Çınar, "Mission Impossible?" *Private View* 2–5 (1997): 72–78.
- 17 Heath W. Lowry, "Turkey's Political Structure on the Cusp of the Twenty-First Century,"

- in *Turkey's Transformation and American Policy*, ed. Morton Abramowitz (New York: Century Foundation Press, 2000), 48.
- 18 The chief example is Act No. 2945 on the NSC and the National Security Council General Secretariat, which assigns significant and broad political powers to the NSC, placing it on par with the executive.
 - 19 See Kramer, *A Changing Turkey*, 30.
 - 20 Ümit Cizre Sakalhoğlu, "The Anatomy of the Turkish Military's Political Autonomy," *Comparative Politics* 29.2 (1997): 153.
 - 21 Kramer, *A Changing Turkey*, 30.
 - 22 On April 29, 1997, the Turkish General Staff announced a radical change in their basic doctrine (the National Military Defense Concept). Henceforth priority would be given to combating internal threats from, primarily, Islamic activism and, secondarily, the Kurdish separatism, rather than safeguarding against interstate wars and external threats. This new document replaced the one formulated on November 18, 1992, singling out Kurdish terrorist acts as the primary security threat to the state. Both documents were prepared by the secretariat of the NSC and became governmental policy. The parliament was not fully informed about this decision. The defeat inflicted on the PKK by the capture, arrest, trial, and conviction of its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, reinforced this shift.
 - 23 Article 35 of the Military Internal Service Code assigns the military the task of safeguarding the territorial unity and the republic itself. Furthermore, Act No. 2945 assigns three important functions to the NSC secretariat, which enables it to act like the council of ministers. First, the secretary (a general) has the authority to prepare the agenda of the meetings. Next, he is authorized to follow up the implementations of the decisions reached in the NSC meetings and passed to the ministers to act upon with priority consideration. Finally, the secretary can present his suggestions on domestic and foreign policy to the council of ministers directly.
 - 24 A new unit called the Western Study Group (Batı Çalışma Grubu, or BCG) was instituted within general staff headquarters to collect information about the political orientations of civil society groups, mayors, governors, government employees, political party cadres, and media personalities. Moreover, by a governmental decree published in the official gazette on January 9, 1997, a new organ called the Prime Ministerial Crisis Management Center (Başbakanlık Kriz Yönetim Merkezi) was formed within the NSC secretariat to observe and report on "crises," a vaguely defined term in the decree, and formulate responses to them. As the center was placed within the NSC but called "Prime Ministerial," it had an ambiguous structural and functional position. It bypassed parliamentary control of its activities and was seemingly responsible to the prime minister but was, in reality, answerable only to the NSC.
 - 25 When the Constitutional Court was handling the closure case filed against the FP, the military issued a judgmental statement that the FP is a source of reactionism, indicating the direction that the case would follow. Before April 1999 general elections, the then-president of the republic, Süleyman Demirel, also equated the FP with the RP.
 - 26 The reformist group constituted usually the younger generation of the MGH such as Abdullatif Sener, Salih Kapusuz, Abdullah Gül, and their leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

- Bulent Arinç, who has been in the movement ever since its inception, was with the reformists as well as the newcomers to FP such as Ali Coşkun, Abdulkadir Aksu, and Cemil Çiçek, all from the conservative wing of the ANAP. The traditionalists, on the other hand, included the leader of the FP, Recai Kutan, as well as the top administrative officials of the party such as Bahri Zengin, Veysel Candan, and Oğuzhan Asiltürk.
- 27 Hence, the first convention of the FP, held on May 14, 2000, was also the first competitive convention in the whole history of the MGH. In this convention, despite Erbakan's disapproval, the reformist faction challenged the traditionalist leadership of the party and lost by only a small margin, which is usually taken as evidence that Erbakan's moral authority over the movement was no longer intact.
- 28 "Refah Örgütünde Çiller Tepkisi" [Çiller reaction in the rank-and-file of the Refah], *Milliyet*, October 27, 1997.
- 29 "Kutan'dan 'Kavgaya Yok' Sözü" [Kutan promises "no fight"], *Hürriyet*, February 11, 1999.
- 30 "Tansu Bize Gelecek 3: Türbanda Dikkatliyiz" [Tansu will join us 3: We are careful about headscarf], *Hürriyet*, February 8, 1999.
- 31 Bilal Çetin, "Kutan'dan FP'nin 'Sistem Partisi' Olduğuna İnandırma Çabası" [Kutan's attempt to convince that the FP is a 'systemic party'], *Radikal*, February 11, 1999. This acquiescent stance does not really represent a radical break from the past, when we bear in mind that the main actors of this tradition considered the military the biggest defender and guardian of democracy in Turkey, denied the obvious role of the military in the making of the February 28 process, and refrained from publicizing or precluding the operations of the BCG, which gathered the intelligence that made the process possible in the first place.
- 32 "Enine Boyuna Fazilet 2: 28 Subat Aynı Şiddetle Devam Etmiyor" [Comprehensive virtue 2: February 28 process is not continuing with the same momentum], *Sabah*, March 28, 1999.
- 33 Recai Kutan, "Birinci Olağan Kongre Açılış Konuşması" [First convention opening speech], May 14, 2000, ASKI Sports Hall (Ankara: [n.p.], 2000), 12.
- 34 For a detailed analysis of the RP's politics and vision of state-society relationship, see Menderes Çınar, "From Shadow-Boxing to Critical Understanding: Some Theoretical Notes on Islamism as a 'Political Question,'" *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 3.1 (2002): 35-57.
- 35 See Süleyman Arif Emre, "Atatürk'ün Çizdiği Laiklik Çerçevesi" [The framework of secularism as drawn by Atatürk], *Milli Gazete*, February 8, 1997.
- 36 See Bilal Çetin, "Anlamlı Randevu" [A meaningful appointment], *Yeni Şafak*, September 29, 2000.
- 37 Abdullah Karakuş, "Kutan: Türk-Kürt Ayrımı Yapılmıyor" [Kutan: There is no differentiation between Kurds and Turks], *Milliyet*, March 20, 2000. For a detailed study of the Islamist movement's approach to the Kurdish question, see Burhanettin Duran, "Approaching the Kurdish Question via Adil Duzen: An Islamist Formula of the Welfare Party for Ethnic Coexistence," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 18.1 (1998): 111-28.
- 38 Aydın Menderes, interview by Mustafa Karaalioglu, "Önce Refah Mezara Girdi" [First the RP was buried], *Yeni Şafak*, November 6, 2000; Aydın Menderes, interview by

- Naki Özkan, "Erbakan'ın Son Kullanma Tarihi Geçti" [Erbakan's expiration date is past], *Milliyet*, November 8, 2000.
- 39 "Erbakan'a Gül Dikeni" [Gül (rose) thorn to Erbakan], *Radikal*, January 22, 1998; "Abdullah Gül: Hatalarımız Oldu" [Abdullah Gül: We have made mistakes], *Zaman*, August 30, 1998.
- 40 Bulent Arinc, interview by Nilgun Cerrahoglu, "Libya Gezisi Bir Felaketti" [Visit to Libya was a disaster], *Milliyet*, February 22, 1998; Bulent Arinc, interview by Kemal Can, "Refah Partisini Ozlemiyoruz" [We do not miss the RP], *ArtiHaber*, June 20-26, 1998, 54-55.
- 41 Bülent Arınç, interview by Mehmet Gündem, "Askerle Polemik Hataydı" [Polemic with the military was a mistake], *Zaman*, February 6, 2000.
- 42 Bülent Arınç, interview by Yurdagül Erkoca, "FP"li Arınç Büyük Konuştu" [Arınç spoke rigorously], *Radikal*, May 25, 1998; Abdullah Gül, interview by Neşe Düzel, "Ben 28 Şubatı İmzalamazdım" [I would not have signed the February 28 decisions], *Radikal*, June 5, 2000.
- 43 Abdullah Gül, interview by Ruşen Çakır, "Şeriatçılar Marjinal" [Reactionists are marginal], *Milliyet*, February 9, 2000.
- 44 Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, interview by Eyüp Can, "Şeriat Devletini Ciddiye Almıyorum" [I do not take a Sharia state seriously], *Zaman*, February 6, 2000.
- 45 For example, the current president of the republic, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, drew Erdoğan's attention to the Constitutional Court's sensitivity on secularism and equated his demand for "a state that respects religion" with "a state based on religion." See "Sezer'den Erdoğan'a Rejim Uyarısı" [Sezer warns Erdoğan on regime], *Cumhuriyet*, December 5, 2001.
- 46 Although he benefited from a law that postponed the penalties of December 2000, Erdoğan's position as the chairman of the party as well as his eligibility to be elected and to be prime minister remain legally ambiguous. This is so because in January 2002, the Constitutional Court upheld the charge of the Chief Public Prosecutor of High Court of Appeals that Erdoğan could not be a founding member, and therefore not the chairman of the AKP, because of his previous conviction for inciting religious hatred. The court ordered the AKP to comply with its decision within six months. The implications of this decision have divided lawyers. Whether he can lead a party and stand as a candidate for the parliament in the elections is still not clear.
- 47 Kramer, *A Changing Turkey*, 87.