Mesut Yılmaz is a member of the new and younger generation of Turkish political leaders. Unlike the older veterans of contemporary Turkish politics, such as Bülent Ecevit and Süleyman Demirel, who began their political careers in the late 1950s and early 1960s, respectively, Yılmaz entered politics in 1983 at the age of thirty-four. Despite his youth and lack of political experience, however, he attained national prominence very rapidly as a protégé of Turgut Özal. When the forty-three-year-old Yılmaz was elected as the head of the Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi—ANAP) in 1991, he became one of the youngest political party leaders in modern Turkish history. Unlike Ecevit or Demirel, Yılmaz was not involved in the breakdowns that Turkish democracy experienced in 1960, 1971, and 1980. However, he was an active participant in the redemocratization of the Turkish political system following the three-year military rule from 1980 to 1983. As the leader of a major political party, he has been a central figure in Turkish politics since the early 1990s.

Origins and Political Career

Mesut Yılmaz, who was born in Istanbul in 1947, belongs to a prominent political family in the eastern Black Sea province of Rize. His uncle İzzet Akçal served as a Democratic Party (Demokrat Parti—DP) deputy and a minister in the Adnan Menderes governments in the 1950s, and his cousin Erol Akçal served as a Justice Party (Adalet Partisi—AP) deputy and briefly as a minister in the Nihat Erim cabinet in 1971. Surrounded by politicians in the family, Mesut Yılmaz was drawn to politics at a very early age. He was only a young
Alev Çınar and Ergun Özbudun

teenager when he started corresponding with his uncle İzzet Akçal, who was serving a prison sentence along with other DP deputies following the 1960 coup. His uncle’s journey through the turbulent pathways of political life left an enduring impression on the young man: It was probably the single most important reason for his determination to become a politician. The family’s political affiliations with the center-right parties also played an important role in shaping his own political orientation and worldview.

Yılmaz grew up in an upper-class urban environment and received a good education. He graduated from Istanbul Boys’ High School (İstanbul Erkek Lisesi), one of the best public high schools in Turkey, and from the Faculty of Political Science (Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi—SBF) of Ankara University in 1971. Between 1972 and 1974, he pursued his graduate studies at the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences at Cologne University in Germany. After his return from Germany, Yılmaz became a businessman and worked as an executive of several manufacturing and trading companies until 1983.

As a student at the SBF in Ankara, Yılmaz was actively involved in student politics at a time when political activism on the university campuses was on the ascendancy in Turkey. Soon after enrolling at the university, he was elected to the SBF’s Student Union, which was headed by Murat Karayalçın, who was later to become the mayor of Ankara and a prominent center-left politician. At the SBF, Yılmaz displayed a strong independent attitude: unlike the majority of the politically active students who supported left-wing causes, he was on the political right of the ideological spectrum and a strong proponent of Turkish nationalism. One incident at the SBF was particularly illustrative of his political stand: when the students, led by a number of leftist groups, organized a boycott, it was supported by everyone on campus, except Yılmaz, who refused to join the boycott and passed the exams with flying colors.

His interest in politics during his student years was not limited to the activities on the SBF campus and reading books on the subject. Determined to pursue a political career one day himself, he developed a keen interest in observing the proceedings of the Parliament, where he had a chance to see live political action at close range. Later, Yılmaz would tell a journalist who interviewed him that while studying at the university in Ankara, he used to go to Parliament at least four days a week.

He was ready to embark on a career in politics upon returning from graduate study in Germany. But he did not find the right political party for himself. His political ideas and background directed him toward the Justice Party, the heir to the DP that was closed after the 1960 military coup. However, Yılmaz apparently did not feel comfortable working in a party organization that was largely built around an extensive network of patron-client relations. His upper-class urban social background and graduate education in Europe, coupled with his deep interest in books, made him look more like an intellectual than a politician. This made it difficult for Yılmaz to easily fit into a political party structure.
that required skills in and familiarity with the clientelist networks of the countryside.

Despite his obvious political ambition, Yılmaz chose to go into the private sector for nearly a decade after returning to Turkey from Germany. During this period, he also did his compulsory military service in Çanakkale and got married in 1976. Later, when he got into politics, his wife, Berna, proved to be an important asset, since she projected an image of an amiable, intelligent, level-headed, and compassionate person. Her involvement in a wide array of little publicized charity work has helped to strengthen her husband’s public standing.

Yılmaz’s political career started in 1983 upon Turgut Özal’s invitation to become one of the founding members of ANAP. When the call came from Özal in 1983 offering him to be a founding member of ANAP, Yılmaz knew his time had come. Özal was planning to build a new party based on novel principles and wanted to gather around him young and well-educated people who were outsiders to the Turkish political scene. Yılmaz had finally found for himself a political organization where he would feel at home, and indeed ANAP became his home from where he would advance his political career and reach the goals that he had cherished since his childhood.

In the November 1983 national elections that ended the three-year-old military rule, Yılmaz got elected as a deputy from his family’s home province of Rize on the Black Sea coast. Prime Minister Özal chose him to be a state minister in charge of information services and as the government spokesman. In 1986, Yılmaz became the minister of culture and tourism. Following the November 1987 national elections, he served as the minister of foreign affairs in the second Özal cabinet. He continued to serve in the same capacity in the Yıldırım Akbulut government that was formed after Özal’s election to the presidency in 1989. Yılmaz resigned from this post on February 20, 1990, and started to prepare for ANAP’s upcoming General Congress in 1991, where he would challenge Akbulut for party leadership.

In these earlier years in ANAP, Yılmaz had the full support and confidence of Özal, who gave him increasingly important posts in his cabinets. ANAP was for all practical purposes Özal’s creation. Özal dominated his party to such an extent that when he left party leadership to become president of the Republic, few observers predicted a smooth transition in leadership. Even party unity was thought to be in danger, since Özal’s personal influence had been instrumental in maintaining a precarious balance among the conservative, nationalist, and liberal factions within the party. Özal’s choice for party leadership and the premiership was Akbulut, the speaker of Parliament. While he was prime minister, Akbulut willingly accepted a secondary role in policy-making and let Özal run party and government affairs from behind the scenes. Thus, the governmental system during this period (1989-91) was, in fact, a de facto semipresidential system.

In ANAP’s General Congress in June 1991 Yılmaz successfully challenged Akbulut for the party leadership. It is not clear whether Yılmaz was Özal’s first
choice. But Özl’s wife, Semra Özl, actively supported Yılmaz’s candidacy. She and others who supported Yılmaz preferred him over Akbulut mainly because of the image he projected: a well-educated and ambitious Özl loyalist who had a clean slate and a promising career before him. This was exactly the image that ANAP wanted to project as a party—a new young dynamic party that was not corrupted with the “dirty politics of the earlier decades.” Furthermore, most of the prominent individuals in ANAP’s leadership ranks supported Yılmaz because he seemed to be the perfect candidate to act as a balancing force among the three main wings of the party, namely the conservatives, the nationalists, and the liberals. Although ideologically Yılmaz came from a nationalist background, he was a pursuer of liberal ideals. This enabled him to accommodate the different ideological currents within the party more easily than others, such as Akbulut who was closely identified with ANAP’s conservative wing. As a result, Mesut Yılmaz emerged victorious from the party congress and became ANAP’s new leader in 1991. Subsequently, Özl invited him to form the new government. On July 5, 1991, Prime Minister Yılmaz’s government received a vote of confidence from Parliament.

When Yılmaz became ANAP’s leader, he found himself facing two difficult challenges. The first was the most arduous task of filling the shoes of Özl, who, after Atatürk, had been Turkey’s most charismatic and influential politician and the architect of ANAP’s innovative program along liberal lines. His second challenge was to maintain ANAP’s electoral strength at a time when it was faced with both old and new potent rivals, such as the True Path Party (Doğru Yol Partisi—DYP), the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi—RP) and the Nationalist Action Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi—MHP). After becoming party leader, Yılmaz was forced to meet these difficult challenges and also uphold democratic principles above ideological concerns and partisanship.

Yılmaz’s first government lasted only for a few months. In the national elections of October 1991, ANAP finished second after its principal rival for the center-right, Demirel’s DYP. The election loss ended ANAP’s eight-year-long uninterrupted rule and forced it into the opposition for the first time since the party’s founding in 1983. It was replaced in power by a coalition government that was formed by Prime Minister Demirel and included the DYP and the Social Democratic Populist Party (Sosyal Demokrat Halkçı Parti—SHP). After his brief stint as prime minister in 1991, Yılmaz served as the leader of the main opposition party until the 1995 elections.

While Mesut Yılmaz had the full support of Özl during the early years of his career in ANAP, Özl not only withdrew his support but also took an active campaign against his leadership in 1992. When Yılmaz won the party leadership in 1991 and became prime minister, he made it clear that he would not play second fiddle, which undoubtedly irritated Özl. When ANAP lost the October 1991 elections, the relations between Yılmaz and Özl further deteriorated. Throughout 1992 Özl increasingly criticized Yılmaz and withdrew his support, giving signals for the need for a new leader. They hardly talked to each other
and there were rumors that at the end of his term as president, Özal would form a new party, taking away a group of his loyalists from ANAP.

Özal’s main complaint was that Yılmaz was acting too much on his own and not asking for his views on important policy decisions. Özal went as far as publicly declaring in 1992 that Yılmaz was not fit to continue his job as leader of the ANAP. It seems that Özal wanted a chairman for ANAP that would allow him to remain as the real leader of the party. However, Yılmaz was determined not to play the role that Özal had hoped his protégé would play. Although Yılmaz did not take an active stance against Özal, he did his best to establish his own authority and power in the party. While Özal was still alive, this proved to be a difficult task for Yılmaz, since many in ANAP’s organization owed their primary loyalty to the party’s founder and its preeminent personality, Turgut Özal. Nevertheless, Yılmaz did succeed in scoring a major victory in the new party congress that was convened in November 1992 to resolve the leadership issue. Despite Özal’s support for Mehmet Keçeciler, a member of the party’s conservative wing, Yılmaz won the majority of the votes and was reelected as ANAP’s leader.

This was the first-ever triumph that Yılmaz won on his own without the backing of Özal or his wife. Following Yılmaz’s victory in the congress, Özal’s candidate, Keçeciler, and several other influential leaders of ANAP who were close to Özal, including his wife, Semra Özal, and children, Ahmet and Zeynep, resigned from the party. Their departure from ANAP appeared to be a fatal blow to ANAP’s position as a leading party in Turkish politics. But Yılmaz immediately set to work and started a thorough campaign to rebuild and strengthen the party under his own leadership. This campaign paid off, and within three months several of the deserters returned to the party, including such prominent veterans as Keçeciler and Akbulut, who have worked successfully with Yılmaz ever since.

While this initial challenge posed by Özal made the onset of Yılmaz’s career in leadership a difficult beginning, it proved to serve well for Yılmaz in the long run. This challenge rescued Yılmaz from remaining in Özal’s shadow, removing all clouds of doubt over his legitimacy as a leader, and made it clear that his leadership was indeed a hard-earned victory that he himself alone could take credit for.

In the December 1995 elections, ANAP came second after the Welfare Party, with 19.7 percent of the vote. After considerable negotiations and bargaining between potential coalition partners, two center-right parties, the ANAP and the DYP, formed a government headed by Prime Minister Yılmaz in March 1996. However, his tenure as prime minister this time proved to be even shorter than in 1991. The ANAP-DYP coalition collapsed after only three months due to the personal feuds and tense relations between Yılmaz and Tansu Çiller, leader of the DYP. A new coalition between the Welfare Party (RP) and DYP led by the RP leader, Necmettin Erbakan, replaced this government. The Erbakan government lasted about a year and was forced to resign as a result of dete-
riorating relations with the military and the leading civil society organizations, that is as a consequence of what is euphemistically called the “February 28 Process.” Yılmaz was again invited to form the new government on June 20, 1997, and was able to forge a coalition with the participation of ANAP, the center-left Democratic Left Party (Demokratik Sol Parti—DSP), and the small center-right Democratic Turkey Party (Demokratik Türkiye Partisi—DTP). It was also supported in Parliament by the center-left Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi—CHP). The new Yılmaz government was able to pass some important reform laws, including a tax reform bill and a law providing for eight-year compulsory secular education. The latter led to the closure of the junior-high sections of Prayer Leader and Preacher Schools (a point strongly stressed in the February 28, 1997, decisions of the National Security Council). However, the government fell as a result of the CHP’s withdrawing its parliamentary support at the end of 1998. The CHP leader, Deniz Baykal, claimed that Yılmaz as prime minister had been personally involved in some of the privatization efforts of the government, a claim that had the implications of political corruption. The ANAP—DSP—DTP coalition was replaced by the minority government of Bülent Ecevit’s DSP, which was charged with leading the country into the early national elections of April 18, 1999.

The results of the 1999 elections were a catastrophe for ANAP (as well as for the DYP). ANAP came out as the fourth party, with only 13.2 percent of the votes. The DSP leader, Ecevit, formed the new coalition government with the participation of the MHP and ANAP. Yılmaz did not wish to take part in the government, stating that he would not do so until he was cleared from the corruption charges leveled against him by Baykal. But he took an active part in the frequent leadership summits of the three coalition leaders, which were instrumental in maintaining a harmonious relationship among the coalition partners. One year after the elections, however, he was persuaded to join the cabinet as one of the three deputy prime ministers with the responsibility to coordinate Turkey’s full membership application to the European Union.

Yılmaz’s Personality

When Mesut Yılmaz first became ANAP’s leader, he was criticized for projecting the image of a cold, calculating person with a stern expression that was taken as a lack of sense of humor and compassion. Indeed, his public appearances during his early years as party leader conveyed an image of a very serious-looking, distant person who lacked the warm and charismatic style of his predecessor, Özal. Yılmaz certainly lacked Özal’s natural charisma. The underlying cause of his stern and aloof image was most probably that Yılmaz was trying to hide his initial lack of self-confidence arising from his inexperience and self-doubt about his ability to fill Özal’s shoes. Also, he was
probably worried that his associates, most of whom were older senior members of ANAP, would not take him too seriously because of his young age. Hence, he was trying hard to project a serious and stern image, being too cautious, weighing every word he uttered carefully, thereby coming across as a cold, calculating person who spoke slowly. In fact, the slowness of his speech drew so much attention that a popular joke about him was widely circulated: “Yılmaz is now being offered commercials in between his words during public presentations!”

Those who were close to Yılmaz have disputed these characterizations of him. For example, his wife, Berna Yılmaz, has stated on many occasions that her husband is a passionate and talkative person who just does not like to show his feelings. Among his friends, Yılmaz is known to have a dry, witty sense of humor with which he likes to surprise his friends and colleagues when they least expect such behavior from him. It is this sense of humor matched with a deep sense of loyalty in friendships that defies the cold and stern attitude that Yılmaz projects in public. Yılmaz is known to base all his relationships, ranging from his party associates to journalists and others with whom he interacts regularly, on a firm sense of friendship and mutual trust. He is known to be a good listener, who actively seeks the opinions and advice of his friends, associates, and advisors. He easily forms close friendship ties with those who share a similar sense of humor, and honor his sense of loyalty, regardless of political opinion and ideology or public standing. This personality trait allows Yılmaz to maintain authority tempered with a sense of friendship where he can demand loyalty from his associates without resorting to dictatorial measures. He is known to be very loyal to his friends, supporting them all the way through in difficult times and overlooking minor mistakes, but demanding an absolute commitment and devotion in return. Friendships are an all-or-none matter for him, for when he feels seriously let down, he does not forgive and forget.

Mesut Yılmaz’s most prominent personality trait that is the driving motor of his career is his determination to go until the very end in pursuit of his goals, no matter what it takes. Yılmaz has jokingly referred to this aspect of his personality by saying that he is like the “patriot missile”: once he locks onto his target, nothing can keep him from reaching it. It is this determination and resolve that have played an important role in the ability of Yılmaz to overcome problems that he has encountered in his political career and to attain important positions both in the government and in Turkish party politics.

**Leadership Style, Skills, and Strategies**

Lacking the sort of personal charisma that Özal had, the organizational skills that Demirel had, and the consistent adherence to a particular ideology that has fueled the leadership of a politician such as Erbakan, one wonders what it is that
has kept Yılmaz in power in his party since the early 1990s. Possibly this is due to his skills in developing effective political strategies. The mastery of political strategy, that is, the ability to maneuver through the unexpected twists and turns of politics, is one of Yılmaz’s strongest assets which he developed fairly early in the game. If mastery of political strategy requires skill in forging of alliances and the ability to mediate crucial points of contention toward agreements, then Mesut Yılmaz has indeed been an able political strategist especially in securing his leadership in ANAP.

As mentioned above, when Yılmaz became the leader of ANAP in 1991, he faced two main challenges that laid out for him a very difficult career path. First, he needed to establish himself as a political leader with the authority and leadership qualities of his own without alienating himself too much from the charismatic image of Turgut Özal. Second, he had to lead ANAP at a time when the party had many rivals such as the True Path Party, the newly rising Welfare Party, and later the Nationalist Action Party. Unlike the early 1980s when ANAP under Özal’s rule had no strong rivals, the party under Yılmaz faced a considerable competition in the center-right. The success of Mesut Yılmaz’s career should be assessed with respect to his skill in tackling these challenges.

In order to meet the first challenge, Yılmaz had to assert his own leadership. On the one hand, he had to show that he was not a mere substitute or a poor imitation of Özal, but had leadership qualities and unique skills of his own. On the other hand, he had to remain true to the party principles and ideals that had very much become synonymous with Özal’s style and charisma. To establish the authority sufficient enough to run a party that had played a transformative role in Turkish politics, he had to draw on his own unique skills and develop his own style. But doing so meant running the risk of distancing himself too far from Özal’s persona, which would so easily cost him the support of many of ANAP’s leaders and members who wanted the party to remain loyal to Özal’s legacy.

The second challenge that Yılmaz faced involved securing a unique place for ANAP in the wider political spectrum when there were several other powerful rivals competing for the same spot in the center-right. This challenge required Yılmaz to draw on his ability to develop political strategies that would earn ANAP a sufficiently unique status and a competitive edge against its rivals. This was a particularly difficult task, since at no other time in Turkish political history were there so many parties competing for the same electoral constituency. The True Path Party had the advantage of being Süleyman Demirel’s party armed with the powerful legacy of the Justice Party, and was competing for liberal and conservative votes that were previously held by ANAP under Özal. The Welfare Party had successfully mobilized portions of the conservative vote in most of Anatolia that had also previously gone to ANAP. Finally, the Nationalist Action Party was expanding its support base by appealing to the nationalist sentiments of voters in the center-right and thus becoming yet another party competing for ANAP’s votes. Surrounded by such powerful rivals, Yılmaz faced a
serious challenge that required him to cast an image for ANAP that would arm the party with a comparative advantage against its competitors.

Yılmaz’s first test at the polls as the party leader came in the October 1991 national elections, and it was relatively successful if far from being spectacular. ANAP votes had fallen to their lowest point in the 1989 local elections with only 21.8 percent. In the 1991 national elections ANAP increased its votes to 24.0 percent and emerged as the second largest party in Parliament. Indeed, some public opinion polls taken three months after the 1989 local elections had shown the ANAP’s votes around 15.0 percent. Thus, with the election of Yılmaz as party leader, a modest upward trend in ANAP votes was observed.

Even though Yılmaz was a member of the liberal wing of ANAP, he continued ÖZal’s balancing policy and always included the leading members of the conservative and nationalist factions in his governments and the party’s central executive committee. Even though Yılmaz had the chance to change ÖZal’s founding principles after ÖZal passed away in 1993, he preferred to continue with the same political line and chose to remain loyal to ÖZal’s legacy. After ÖZal’s death, his pictures were placed back on the walls and offices of ANAP headquarters and other offices. When Yılmaz was asked to write in a special notebook of remembrance for ÖZal right after his death, he wrote, “ÖZal left us with the historical mission to put into motion his visions and realize his ideals through ANAP, which is his creation. We now work toward the realization of his ideals.”

The initial upward trend of ANAP’s success in the first years of Yılmaz’s leadership did not continue, however. The party received 21.0 percent of the vote in the 1994 local elections, and 19.7 percent in the 1995 parliamentary elections. In the latter, ANAP made an electoral alliance with the ultraconservative Grand Unity Party (Büyük Birlik Partisi—BBP) and also put well-known conservative figures including the late President ÖZal’s brother Korkut ÖZal on the ANAP lists. This friendly gesture toward the conservative right, however, did not bring in new votes to ANAP (for the Welfare Party emerged as the largest party, with 21.4 percent of the vote) and caused it to lose some votes among its liberal supporters.

ANAP registered a further and more serious defeat in the 1999 elections, with only 13.7 percent of the vote, a fate that it shared with Tansu Çiller’s DYP (12.0 percent). The reasons for the weakening of the once dominant center-right tendency in Turkish politics and for the rise of religious and nationalist right-wing parties cannot be fully analyzed here. But there is no doubt that ANAP’s electoral performance under Yılmaz in the last decade has been far from successful. Yılmaz’s inability to put his stamp on Turkish politics must have been a contributory factor here. Nevertheless, such a sharp decline in voter support has not weakened Mesut Yılmaz’s leadership position within ANAP. Furthermore, he has skillfully maneuvered his party into becoming a key mediating force that is an indispensable partner for different sorts of coalitions.
Yılmaz’s strategy in securing this role for ANAP has been to take advantage of one key feature of the party that its rivals lack: commitment to principles of liberalism as a broad frame rather than a tightly defined ideological basis. Sometimes the lack of such an ideological basis worked against the party, in that it made it difficult for the party to express its policies by projecting clear ideological messages as other parties attempted to do. But on the whole it proved to be an advantage that ANAP had over its rivals, by giving the party substantial space for maneuvering its way toward power. Instead of articulating a firm commitment to a particular ideology, Yılmaz projected an image of ANAP as a party that is only concerned with serving the needs of the country. Those needs were designated as democracy, a stronger liberal economy, and political stability that together would make Turkey a viable global player. This image of the party was also congruent with the basic principles laid down by the late Turgut Özal upon which ANAP was founded.\(^{12}\)

This strategy of commitment to the resolution of immediate issues rather than to an ideology made ANAP the best candidate for mediating points of contention between different political parties and thereby made it a key party in forming and leading coalition governments. In other words, with its multi-ideological makeup, ANAP could easily act as the glue that would bring and bind together parties in coalitions that otherwise lacked the ideological compatibility to successfully work together. Yılmaz understood this advantage of his party over its rivals and used it successfully. As such, in spite of the constant decline in electoral support since 1991, Yılmaz succeeded in maintaining ANAP as one of the key parties and an indispensable coalition partner, himself becoming prime minister three times.

Under Yılmaz, the ANAP developed a stronger and more coherent party identity than it had in Özal’s days. But this may be due to the desertion of a sizable number of the more conservative and more nationalist ANAP voters to the Welfare Party and Nationalist Action Party. This led to a strengthening of the liberal credentials of ANAP.

**Political Beliefs and Ideology**

The political philosophy of Mesut Yılmaz reflects the rather eclectic and pragmatic doctrines of ANAP as they evolved under Özal. ANAP’s doctrine has been variously defined as conservative, liberal, nationalist, and modernist. Other terms frequently used to define it are “conservative modernism” or “modern conservatism”. The ANAP program defines the party as nationalist and conservative, committed to social justice and a free-market economy. Indeed, Özal often proudly asserted that ANAP was not a continuation of any of the older parties, but it brought together and synthesized the four main tendencies (nationalism, conservatism, liberalism, and a commitment to social justice) that
prevailed in Turkey in the pre-1980 period. Although the ANAP program does not refer to modernism as such, a commitment to rapid modernization was an important component of the party’s ideology. Among Özal’s favorite themes were “transformation” and “skipping an age,” which reflected such a commitment.

In a booklet he published just before his election to party leadership in 1991, Yılmaz attempted to synthesize these various components of the ANAP doctrine. The title of the booklet is itself suggestive: Nationalism, Modernization, and Democracy in Turkey. He has argued that Turkey paid a heavy price for not having been able to catch up with Western modernization. Furthermore, while in the West the development of nationalism was a product of social dynamics such as urbanization and the emergence of a middle class, Turkish nationalism developed in the late Ottoman Empire in a very different context. In the absence of a middle class, it emerged as a product of modern (i.e., secular) schools and with the considerable help of Turkish émigrés from various parts of the Russian Empire. While nationalism became the dominant ideology of the Republic, the absence of a middle class forced the founders of the Republic to rely on bureaucratic structures. This is the main reason for the failure of the Republic to create sufficient economic and social dynamism. Thus, the single-party period in Turkey was one of economic and social stagnation. Genuine social development and the growth of a middle class started only in the 1950s with the transition to a democratic system.

In Yılmaz’s view, from its very beginnings the concept of nationalism has been linked to that of modernization to such an extent that in the writings of the leading Turkish nationalists the two terms have been used almost as synonyms. Therefore, Turkish nationalism is not a rigid and frozen doctrine isolated from the realities of the country and the world, but is a “dynamic consciousness” adaptable to changing circumstances. Similarly, in the contemporary world, nationalism has to be understood in conjunction with democratic values. A nation’s power can no longer be measured by the bureaucratic power of the state but by the dynamism of its civil society. Democracy is not only an absolutely necessary prerequisite of human dignity, but also a source of power for modern nations because of its determining role in the development and dynamism of civil society.

Thus, after having reconciled nationalism, democracy, and modernization, Mesut Yılmaz has also attempted to synthesize the three components of the ANAP’s doctrine: nationalism, liberalism, and conservatism. He has reiterated the argument that the ANAP’s fundamental aim is to reconcile these three principles. Conservatism unchecked by nationalism and liberalism may lead to reaction and fundamentalism. Nationalism unchecked by conservatism and liberalism may lead to chauvinism, militarism, and xenophobia. Finally, liberalism unchecked by nationalism and conservatism may lead to cosmopolitanism and a rootless admiration for and imitation of the West.
As noted, Yılmaz led his party three times in national elections, those of 1991, 1995, and 1999. Although election platforms for all political parties are hardly noticed by the average voter, the main themes stressed in these campaigns may still shed some light on the leadership style of Yılmaz. The 1991 election campaign was the first one for Yılmaz shortly after his election to the party leadership and the prime ministry.

ANAP's campaign themes in 1991 stressed mostly economic issues. Two of the most important planks were privatization and the fight against inflation. The party promised to reduce the annual rate of inflation to less than 10 percent in the next five years. According to Yılmaz and his aides, the main source of inflation was the deficits of the state-owned industrial plants. To deal with this problem, ANAP pledged to privatize all public economic enterprises, including state-owned banks, in three years. The state would withdraw from industry, trade, and economic management. Tax revenues would be increased not by increasing tax rates but by taxing the untaxed sectors. Yılmaz also criticized the Welfare Party for trying to divide the nation into believers and unbelievers; the real unbelievers, he said, were those who exploited religion for political ends. Turkey should take part in the international arena with her own national identity, which is the Muslim–Turkish identity. This was an area where Turkey is superior to Europe, according to Yılmaz.

The 1995 ANAP election platform included the promises of reforms in the economy, health, education, the judicial system, and social security as well as the reorganization of the state and the strengthening of democracy. A particularly important plank was to increase the powers and the financial resources of local governments. The 1995 election platform reiterated the party's commitment to fight inflation. But the campaign centered mostly on the corruption charges against Tansu Çiller, leader of the True Path Party, and a contrast was drawn between her and the "clean image" of Yılmaz. It was asserted that there would be no parliamentary immunity for crimes of corruption. The campaign also depicted the RP's slogan of "Just Order" as a "Dark Order." The 1999 election campaign, Yılmaz appealed to what he called the "silent majority." He stressed the need for political stability and unity on the right. He criticized the exploitation of religion for political purposes. As a symbolic gesture he signed a "Contract with Turkey," in which he promised several social and economic benefits to a broad segment of the electorate. However, the contract did not explain how those promises were going to be financed.

Two of the recent themes in Yılmaz's political discourse have been democratization and the reorganization of the state. Yılmaz has placed emphasis on the enlargement of the area of individual rights and freedoms as part of democratization. He has frequently repeated his commitment to three fundamental freedoms mentioned in the ANAP program and in the political discourse of the late party leader, Özal: freedom of conscience and religion, freedom of thought and expression, and freedom of economic enterprise. The improvements in these
areas should not be seen as a threat to the security of the state, but as a means of building the state on more solid foundations. ANAP, Yılmaz has argued, has always been aware of the deficiencies in these fields, but the fight against armed terrorism in the southeast has prevented solutions to these problems. Now that the threat of terrorism has subsided, it was high time to take the necessary steps. These three fundamental freedoms should be defined as broadly as in the most advanced Western democracies.25

One of the problems in the area of fundamental rights and freedoms is that in Turkey historically such rights were not won as a result of a popular struggle but were granted from above. Not only in the Ottoman times but also in the Republican era an authoritarian state mentality continued; there has always been a tendency to perceive the state’s interests as sacred and inviolable. This makes for a fundamental difference between Turkey and Western societies. In the latter it is the fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual that are seen as inviolable, not the interests of the state. Turkey has been able to create a modern state and a modern economy but unable to create a modern citizen who is the bearer of rights. There is still an inclination to treat people more as subjects than citizens.26

Consequently Yılmaz has argued for a thorough reorganization of the state so that it could serve the people and not vice versa. Turkey cannot cope with the problems of the twenty-first century with an oversize, clumsy, and outdated state machinery. To overcome this problem Yılmaz has proposed devolution of powers to local authorities. Municipalities should be given greater powers, responsibilities, and financial resources. A second component of the reorganization of the state is the complete withdrawal of the state from the economic field. ANAP’s motto is a “leaner but more effective state.”27

In Yılmaz’s view, ANAP is the best-qualified party to reconcile the fundamental characteristics of the Turkish state (including secularism) with the religious and moral values of the people. Secularism cannot be protected by authoritarian methods but only by means of democratic persuasion. Furthermore, such protection should not hurt the feelings of the great majority of pious Muslims who have nothing to do with religious reaction. Yılmaz is against the exploitation of religion for political purposes, but at the same time believes that Islam is one of the most important dimensions of Turkish national identity. He argues that the ANAP governments of the 1983-91 period successfully reconciled secularism and religious freedoms. He criticizes both the strictly secularist Republican People’s Party and the religiously oriented Welfare Party for engaging in attempts of social engineering in opposite directions; they both are “dictatorial and totalitarian” political parties intent on forcing the people into their respective rigid molds.28
Impact on Turkish Democracy

During the 1990s, Yılmaz has not performed well in terms of his leadership of ANAP. His party’s electoral slide continued throughout the decade, and the party that had enjoyed comfortable parliamentary majorities a decade earlier finished a distant fourth in the 1999 elections. The decline of the party’s standing at the polls reflected, in no small measure, Yılmaz’s declining popularity among the Turkish voters due to his ineffective leadership of ANAP. Yılmaz’s failure to hold on to power as prime minister in 1991 and 1996 further undermined his public image as a strong and decisive leader.

Moreover, Yılmaz’s bitter personal rivalry with Tansu Çiller, the leader of the DYP, adversely affected his own public image as well as the electoral fortunes of ANAP. The ANAP-DYP coalition from December 1995 to June 1996 came to an end because of conflicts among the governing parties or their leaders. From the beginning of Çiller’s leadership of the DYP in 1993, Yılmaz underestimated her as a politician, and acted on the assumption that she can be defeated easily. Instead of seeing Çiller as another viable rival to be reckoned with, he took for granted that Demirel’s replacement by such a politically inexperienced young woman would inevitably bring the DYP to its end, thus eliminating ANAP’s chief rival from politics. For this reason, Yılmaz never took the issue of a merger between the two parties seriously, and instead chose to pursue a strategy to end Çiller’s leadership and to bring about an eventual dissolution of the DYP into ANAP.

As a result, Yılmaz started a fierce campaign against Çiller, accusing her of corruption, incompetence, fraud, and deception. Yılmaz targeted not only her policies and political ethics, but also her person and gender. He made such statements as, “One cannot be a prime minister only because one is beautiful,” and, “One cannot lead a country by posing for cameras and changing into different clothes; it requires hard work and responsible behavior.”

The March 1994 local elections made it clear that the price for this strategy of personally targeting Çiller would be high for ANAP. Not only did the DYP remain to be a viable force under Çiller, but also the Islamist RP emerged as the true beneficiary of this bitter battle between the two major center-right parties. The elections represented a serious defeat for Yılmaz, since the RP won the mayoralties of most of the major cities, including Istanbul and Ankara, and the DYP did not disappear from the political scene. This was one of those instances when Yılmaz’s self-described “missilelike” determination worked to his disadvantage, since he remained “locked on his target” even after the failure of the elections. He continued his highly personalized charges and attacks against Çiller, which only served to deepen the crisis within ANAP, resulting in a search for a new leader. Some prominent veterans of ANAP such as Güneş Taner and Bahattin Yücel resigned. The ensuing short-lived coalition partnership with the DYP in 1995 tarnished Yılmaz’s public image due to his ungentlemanly attitude
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toward Çiller in a well-publicized debate on television. Yılmaz's unwillingness to change his strategy not only cost his party loss of votes in the elections, but it also worked against political stability in Turkey. The collapse of the ANAP-DYP coalition led Çiller to form a partnership with the RP in 1996. This new coalition, in turn, turned out to be a crisis-ridden experiment and ended with its ouster from power a year later under pressure from the military and the secularist forces.

One important contribution of Yılmaz to the democratization process has been his ability to put aside ideological and other policy differences when democratic principles were at stake. Perhaps the incident when he demonstrated this ability most explicitly was in 1993 when Süleyman Demirel was elected by Parliament as president of the Republic after Özal's death. At the time Demirel was widely criticized for having shirked his responsibility to serve the country as prime minister and for having preferred the presidency with only limited executive powers. In spite of the former fierce and bitter political rivalry between Yılmaz and Demirel, Yılmaz stood by Demirel. Yılmaz declared, "The office of the president of the Republic surpasses all ideological and partisan politics," and that respect and recognition should be given to Demirel hereinafter. There was substantial opposition to Demirel from among the ranks of ANAP. Yılmaz worked hard to enlist the support of ANAP's parliamentarians for Demirel's candidacy and defended his support for Demirel as an endorsement of democratic principles.

Yılmaz has also been a champion of intraparty democracy. Among different political parties in Turkey, the ANAP has perhaps been the most democratically run party with regard to the ways in which party policies are made. All key policies are widely discussed among the ANAP parliamentarians and the members of the relevant party committees. Decisions are often taken democratically. In times of conflict or even deadlock, Yılmaz prefers to bring convincing arguments and evidence to gain support for his policy, instead of resorting to suppressive or authoritarian measures that have been commonly practiced by most other Turkish party leaders.

A telling example of Yılmaz's commitment to democratic leadership concerns the legislation on the extension of compulsory secular schooling to eight years in 1997 when ANAP was the leading partner of the coalition government. The eight-year compulsory secular education issue had been on the legislative agenda for many years, but was given a top-priority status in February 1977 by the National Security Council. The sensitivity of the issue arose from the fact that the extension of compulsory schooling to eight years meant that the junior-high sections of the Prayer Leader and Preacher Schools (Imam Hatip Okulları) would be closed down.

Opposition to the eight-year secular schooling legislation came not only from the RP and other Islamist groups in the country but also from among the conservative ANAP ranks. This was a critical issue for ANAP because it could have caused a serious split within the party, which, at the least, could have pre-
vented Yılmaz from bringing it before Parliament, let alone its enactment into law. In spite of such risks involved, instead of suppressing and silencing the dissension, Yılmaz opened the issue up for discussion. The resulting fierce debates were interpreted by the bulk of the media as a serious sign of frictions and cracks within the party. But Yılmaz successfully gathered support for his stance in favor of passing the law by coming up with arguments that convinced most dissenters, thereby having a highly controversial and difficult law pass under his premiership.

As this example suggests, in contrast to most other leaders, Yılmaz not only tolerates, but also welcomes opposing views. He sees it as a means of strengthening his party rather than weakening it. Furthermore, the adherence to such principles of democratic leadership allows Yılmaz to not only secure cohesion within his party but also to open up platforms of consensus on broader political debates. On the other hand, Yılmaz has often been unable to take initiative and come up with viable projects that would contribute to his party’s popular appeal.

Yılmaz played a positive role in the formation of the post-1999 coalition government of the Democratic Left Party of Bülent Ecevit, the Nationalist Action Party of Devlet Bahçeli, and ANAP. He played a crucial mediating role when during the talks for coalition, Rahşan Ecevit, deputy chairwoman of the DSP and Bülent Ecevit’s wife, publicly stated that the MHP could not be trusted because of its past involvement in political violence. It seemed that the coalition negotiations would collapse when Bahçeli insisted that unless Rahşan Ecevit apologized his party would not take part in the coalition, and Bülent Ecevit responded by declaring that there was no need for an apology. In the event, a coalition was formed not only because both Ecevit and Bahçeli moderated their stand but also because Yılmaz played an effective mediating role.

Since 1961, ineffective and incoherent coalition governments had governed Turkey. The 1997 ANAP–DSP–DTP government led by Yılmaz turned out to be an effective as well as a coherent coalition; it produced such significant legislation as the eight-year compulsory secular education, which was for the most part suggested by the National Security Council. The post-1999 DSP–MHP–ANAP coalition led by Ecevit, to which Yılmaz joined later as deputy prime minister, has been the most effective and coherent coalition Turkey had since 1961. It has enacted into law important and bold measures to tackle the country’s serious socioeconomic problems. The politically responsible as well as responsive performance of the government has won the military’s respect. Consequently, the military has felt less of a need to get involved in the policy-making process through the National Security Council. This development can only be seen as marking an important positive step toward the consolidation of Turkish democracy.
Notes

3. For the conflict between Özal and Yılmaz, see Yılmaz Çetiner, Son On Yılın Perde Arkası: Mesut Yılmaz (İstanbul: Milliyet, 1994), passim.
6. Hürriyet (İstanbul daily), March 7, 1993.
7. Roderic H. Davison, Turkey: A Short History (Huntingdon, U.K.: Eothen Press, 1998), 212. We return to this point below.
11. Milliyet (İstanbul daily), April 23, 1993.
15. Cumhuriyet (İstanbul daily), September 27, 1991.
22. Cumhuriyet, April 4, 1999; Sabah, April 9, 1999.
23. Cumhuriyet, April 8, 1999; Sabah, April 13, 1999.
26. Cumhuriyet, March 5, 1999, 45, 60, 121.
33. For an account of such trends in Turkish politics as personalism, centralization, and a high degree of party discipline, see Ergun Özbudun, Contemporary Turkish Politics: Challenges to Democratic Consolidation (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2000).