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Political Islam and Secular Democracy: The Rise of the Refah Party in Turkey

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The Refah Party entered the political arena in Turkey at a time when the public felt political parties were unresponsive and the government was corrupt. The party changed the public's expectations of political parties through grassroots campaigning and responsive governing. Although the Refah Party has found it difficult to follow through with many of its campaign promises without incurring large costs to the government, the rise of the Refah Party has had a profound impact on Turkish politics.

The secularization of the Turkish political system has left little room for religious organizations to influence governmental institutions. Access to political power is extremely difficult for religious organizations. Indeed, the vast gulf dividing church and state as outlined in Turkey's secular constitution is seemingly unbridgeable. The military, seeing themselves as the defender of Kemal Ataturk's secular democracy, have made the gulf even wider. It is under these conditions that political Islam, embodied in the Refah Party, has recently emerged upon the Turkish political scene as an important political player. The Refah Party's issue-based campaign propaganda and approach to governing have changed the political system in Turkey by increasing the people's expectations of what government officials ought to deliver: namely, that government officials should act as representatives of the people, furthering interest articulation and interest aggregation.

A Brief History of Politics in Turkey

The polarization of income classes has caused the Turkish government to become an unrepresentative elitist entity. In fact, Turkey has one of the ten worst income distributions in the world.1 “The pattern of high income inequality in Turkey has undoubtedly been exacerbated by the chronically high rates of inflation that have existed over the past two decades.” Barry Rubin noted, “The main political parties are arrogantly unresponsive to public needs. Government, bureaucracy, and the political elite view themselves as the society's master rather than as public servants.” This elitist conception, held by most Turkish governmental officials, has caused governmental corruption to become the status quo in Turkish politics. Indeed, scandals and corruption have discredited almost all of the political parties.2 In particular, the severe damage to Turkey's infrastructure caused by the earthquake of August 1999 illuminated a number...
of corrupt political practices, including the government's failure to enforce building code regulations. Although for a number of years the people of Turkey have been critical of the rampant corruption and apparent ineffectiveness of governmental regimes to represent the rights of the people, little progress has been made in cleaning up the dark corners of Turkish politics.

The party system in Turkey has traditionally been deadlocked. The lack of consensus in the Turkish political party scene arose from a seemingly perpetual internal conflict between competing elite entities. As a result, parties have consistently failed to translate voter demands into public policy. Other apparent results included voter disillusionment and a "corresponding erosion in social rights, including both a decline in the bargaining capacity of labor unions as well as a reduction in the degree of entitlement to key social services in the areas of education, health, and social security." The increasing inability of the state to cater to the demands of its constituency, especially the demands of the poor, the disadvantaged, and excluded minority groups, created a political vacuum. This political vacuum opened the door for the rise of political Islam as an alternative to secular social democracy.

**The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey**

Islam as a political platform first emerged on the Turkish political scene in 1970 with the formation of the National Order Party, which was shut down in 1972 by the Constitutional Court. However, shortly after the Court's decision, the leadership of the National Order Party, headed by Necmettin Erbakan, reorganized the Islamic party under a new name, the National Salvation Party. After the military takeover in 1980, the National Salvation Party was also closed down by the military for violating Article 163 of the Turkish Penal Code, which forbids the use of religious propaganda for political purposes. Erbakan re-emerged upon the Turkish political scene in 1984, establishing his third Islamic coalition, the Refah Party.

In municipal elections on March 27, 1994, the Refah Party stunned the Turkish political community by winning 19.1 percent of the national vote. This strong showing allowed the Refah Party to capture two hundred mayoralties, including Turkey's two largest cities, Istanbul and Ankara. After the early general elections took place on December 24, 1995, the Refah Party emerged as Turkey's majority political party with Necmettin Erbakan as the Prime Minister, 158 of the 550 parliamentary seats, and 21.4 percent of the national vote. Shortly thereafter, in what many in Turkey call a "soft coup," the Turkish military pushed the Refah Party out of office in June 1997. In response to the demands of the military, the Constitutional Court banned the Refah Party on January 16, 1998, ruling that the party's religious platform violated Turkey's secular constitution. However, shortly after the Court's decision, the Islamists reappeared yet again as the Virtue Party.

The Virtue Party suffered major losses in the election of 1999, yet the movement remains active and very much alive. It is interesting to note that the upcoming ultra-rightist National Action Party, which made tremendous gains in the election of 1999, has used the same type of political rhetoric formerly used by the Refah Party. Indeed, the consequences of the Refah Party's success in organizing a grassroots political movement has had an enormous effect on the Turkish political system.

**The Refah Party's Political Campaign**

The Refah Party's political campaign was replete with references to "cleaning up" government. The party's campaign promise of honest and competent government managed to present itself as the natural alternative to secular democrats whose administrations were characterized as inefficient, incompetent, and corrupt. Some have attributed much of the party's strength to the upstanding moral character and personal standing of the party's leader, Necmettin Erbakan. Furthermore, the Refah Party was able to capitalize upon voter disillusionment with corrupt center parties by rhetorical statement in favor of a "Moral Order" and a "Just Economic Order." This rhetoric was
accentuated by the party's attempt to portray itself as pious Muslims motivated by the fear of Allah. The traditional weakness of Islamic movements in Turkey indicates that the appeal of political Islam as an alternative to secular social democracy arises not only from the strength of its moral argument in favor of equity, but also from specific and concrete campaign tactics and political strategies used by the party. The rise of the Refah Party as an important political player in Turkey was facilitated by a highly organized, grassroots political campaign, including highly rhetorical political propaganda and target-oriented pre-election incentives.

Organizational Campaign Strategies

The Refah Party's organizational strength proved to play an important role in influencing the electorate, thus facilitating the election of Refah officials to offices of influence. Paradoxically, in an age where the mass media established itself as the dominant mode of communication, the Refah Party placed major emphasis on grassroots organizations and face-to-face contact with the electorate. The political campaign of 1994 exhibits the strength of the Refah Party's organizational tactics. Women went door to door handing out fliers, soliciting support for Refah candidates. Party supporters sought out and spoke directly with members of the electorate likely to support the Refah movement, persuading individual voters to jump on the Refah Party bandwagon. Candidates were out among the people expressing their view and receiving feedback from their constituency. The party gave enormous attention to step-by-step mobilization of local party representatives, with party militants diligently coming into personal contact with potential voters. These contacts gradually built support for the party by establishing close, personalized relationships. Computer technology was exploited to accumulate and process information on people likely to vote for the party. These organizational tactics afforded strategic advantages to the Refah Party over all other political parties, especially over the social democrats who were in organizational disarray and clearly disregarded issues relating to voter mobilization at the grassroots level.

The grassroots tactics of the Refah Party proved to be extremely effective in motivating the electorate to support Refah Party candidates. In addition, by speaking directly to the electorate and by becoming connected with their constituency, Refah Party officials became conscientious of the individuals they were to represent. This awareness, in turn, led to responsible governing and attempts to truly act as civil servants. Refah Party leaders gained widespread recognition for their effective performance on a local level. In fact, in Refah-controlled municipalities, the party gained a reputation for honest, clean government. However, this reputation was not without blemishes. Mayor Erdogan, a member of the Refah Party, admitted that even after four years in office he was unable to completely eliminate bribery in a municipality that employs more than 30,000 workers. In total, eight mayors associated with the Refah Party were investigated for corruption. However, the number of Refah Party officials accused of corruption was considerably low when compared to other political parties. Indeed, "for the most part, Refah mayors have been more efficient and less corrupt than their predecessors." These general trends demonstrate the Refah Party's connectivity with their constituency.

The Refah Party's ideological populism and grassroots organizational tactics tapped into the people's desire to organize and express themselves politically. "In essence, the populist party serves as the missing emotive and cultural nexus between actors within the state and the larger strata of society. The Refah Party, populist par excellence, has played exactly such a role in Turkey." By providing a vehicle for the Turkish people to voice their views and express their opinions regarding political issues of concern to them, the Refah Party has dramatically altered the political system in Turkey. The emergence of
this simple form of interest articulation, previously enjoyed only by the elite, was a revolutionary phenomenon in that by empowering the individual it laid the groundwork for redirecting political power back to the masses. Through this process, many individuals realized the influence that they can assert through active involvement in the political system. Now that the voice of the people has been heard, it will be difficult for other political parties to gain access to political power without also providing a mechanism where constituents can voice grievances and feel that they are being heard.

**Rhetorical Campaign**

To complement their grassroots organizational tactics, the Refah Party effectively used highly rhetorical political propaganda to gain support for their coalition. The 1991 campaign, orchestrated by some of the young Islamist intellectuals and campaign managers, showed the Refah Party’s commitment to addressing the issues. The political campaign was conducted on billboards, on television, and in the press. Depictions of human profiles and social issues of concern to Turkish citizens were extremely prevalent. These depictions included young men searching for jobs, a female student (wearing the traditional headscarf) longing to attend her university classes, a retired man asking for a better standard of living, and a middle-aged woman (without a headscarf) promoting environmental awareness. The portrayal of a noncovered woman poignantly attests to the party’s inclusionary strategy. The entire campaign incorporated an inclusionary tone focused on issue-based politics. Conversely, other political parties based their electoral campaigns on the personal attributes of their leaders. The Refah Party’s choice to focus on issues of local importance enabled the party to gain the support of many voters who would have otherwise been skeptical of an Islamic party. Furthermore, by using each part of their campaign to target specific social groups, Refah Party candidates were able to gain support from voters otherwise unlikely to support the Islamists.

The municipal elections of March 27, 1994, also demonstrated Refah’s commitment to inclusionary politics and the vocalization of social issues, such as clean government, waste disposal, and prohibition of pornographic films and programs on television. By focusing on issues directly affecting the electorate, the Refah Party set a new standard for Turkish politicians. Previously, political parties primarily focused campaigns on oratory of officials’ attributes while arrogantly ignoring issues affecting the electorate. The Refah Party, on the other hand, has now effectively modeled representative rhetoric. A sufficient number of citizens caught the vision of what the Refah Party was trying to do: address the concerns of their constituency. Subsequently, campaign rhetoric in Turkey became far more issue-oriented. The Turkish people have since used their votes to reward candidates who effectively address major political issues; the electorate, conversely, has also withheld their votes from candidates and political parties who fail to communicate their position in regards to societal problems.

**Published Campaign**

The Refah Party’s use of verbal rhetoric to address and respond to the issues is unprecedented in Turkish politics. Additionally, the Refah Party took another step forward by making their political agenda available to the public in writing. This is evident by the election manifesto booklet issued by the Refah Party for the December 1995 election. In this booklet, the Refah Party addressed and presented a number of concrete solutions relating to the Kurdish population in Southeast Turkey. These measures included the repopulation of evacuated villages, a specific program for the economic development of the region, the repeal of the state of emergency regulation, and lifting the trade embargo imposed on Iraq by the United Nations. By addressing these issues directly and also presenting
concrete solutions, the Refah Party gained the support of a majority of Kurdish citizens.

Catering ones' political campaign toward a certain group of minorities is another revolutionary model in Turkish politics. This model has since been successfully replicated by many prominent political parties in Turkey and is, in turn, becoming an important part of the Turkish political process. Owing to the plurality of political parties in Turkey, minority groups are growing more and more influential in political circles. In response, a number of minorities have organized themselves into active interest groups. The degree to which these interest groups will replace existing elites as powerful political players is a matter yet to be determined. It is important, however, to recognize the profound effect the Refah model has played in facilitating a political system in which interest groups are becoming influential players in national politics.

The “Just Order”

The Refah Party developed a concise economic plan that directly addressed the concerns of the lower income classes regarding the distribution of wealth and income. In their campaign, Refah Party candidates focused upon the party's goal of establishing a “Just Economic Order” (adil ekonomik düzen). The “Just Order” was made up of thirty-one articles dealing with socioeconomic issues. Refah Party candidates used the economic theories encompassed in the “Just Order” to rationally emphasize income distribution and the moral obligation of the state to improve the economic conditions of the poor, disabled, and disadvantaged. Furthermore, the “Just Order” was used to emphasize the importance of free enterprise, private investment, and commercial activity, thus minimizing the role of the state. Although its economic promises might have been inflationary if put into practice, the “Just Order” was exactly what the average Turk wanted to hear. In fact, the Refah Party’s political discourse of the “Just Order” became extremely popular among the poor, especially among Kurdish populations who had become alienated from the Turkish political system. Indeed, the economic theories of the “Just Order” may have been “stronger in colorful rhetoric than in substance,” but the importance of this portion of the Refah Party's campaign is not the soundness of their economic ideas. Instead, it is the remarkable manner in which they worked toward the betterment of Turkey's standard of living, not only by vocally addressing specific issues but also by formulating specific strategies that were attractive to the people. This is representative government at its finest.

The Turkish people recognized and responded to the Refah Party’s revolutionary model. Abdul-baki Erdogmus, a Kurdish citizen, stated, “Refah is the only political party which is outside the system, and it can fulfill the changes we desire . . . justice and freedom under the guarantee of law.” Another Turkish citizen stated, “The Refah Party spent more time and energy discussing equality, social security, welfare, and social justice than any other political party, including the leftist parties.”

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This clearly shows that people acknowledged and appreciated the Refah Party’s effort to reform the political system in Turkey. By discussing the issues of concern to the people, the Refah Party has raised the standard for political responsiveness; the people of Turkey are now requiring more from their elected officials. Expressly, Turkish citizens are now demanding governmental officials that not only vocalize the issues but also produce plans to effectively deal with the issues. Dr. Mehran Kamrava states that, owing to the Refah Party, “the level of public scrutiny of the government has greatly increased.” Furthermore, as a result of the Refah Party’s political campaign strategies, Turkish citizens are now demanding that political parties use their campaigns not only to address but also to present solutions for the ills that affect society.

**Attempt to Portray a Secularized Political Islam**

During the 1996 election, the Refah Party focused on portraying themselves as a modern
political party. Refah Party candidates appeared on television debates without any of the prominent indicators normally associated with an Islamic movement (no beards, for example). Additionally, candidates were attentive to appear well dressed by Western standards. By adjusting their apparel to conform to the secular tastes of the electorate, the Refah Party showed their commitment to representing and including all Turkish citizens. Although this is a minor detail, it is nevertheless quite remarkable that Refah Party candidates listened to public opinion and responded by conforming personal practices. This responsiveness is extraordinary because other political parties have continued to keep themselves aloof from public opinion, focusing instead upon the attitudes of the elites. The Refah Party has again established an important paradigm. Due to the positive actions of the Refah Party in responding to public opinion, all other political parties in Turkey find themselves being judged according to the Refah Party’s higher standard of listening and responding to public opinion.

INCENTIVE-BASED CAMPAIGN

An additional factor that aided the rise of the Refah Party was its incentive-based campaign. Indeed, the Refah Party supplied their constituents with more pre-election incentives and post-election services than their secular competitors. These in-kind incentives that the Refah Party municipal candidates distributed generously among the poor right before the March 1994 municipal elections and the general election of December 1995 had tremendous effects in shifting voters’ support toward Refah Party candidates. Muzaffer Dogan, the Refah Party mayor of Bahcelievler, distributed 1,500 tons of coal during the winter months to the poor, 250-kilogram grocery packages during the holy month of Ramadan to 3,500 families, clothing for 100 university students, and even paid for the circumcision ceremonies of 1,000 children. Additionally, Mehmet Sekmen, the Refah Party mayor of Kartal, reportedly distributed not only coal and groceries to prospective voters, but also money and gold coins. Furthermore, Refah Party mayors have also provided clothing and soup for the poor. These in-kind incentives were not just an attempt to gain political support. They also represent the Refah Party’s attempt to respond to the demands of their constituency. This response is another important breakthrough, in that Turkey’s other political parties “fail to translate voter demands into public policy.” In fact, “except for Refah, there is little ideological or programmatic difference between the parties.” Indeed, “as the income divide further widens, the only civil organization to work with the economically disadvantaged sectors of society en masse is the Refah Party.” Although the purity of the Refah Party’s motives in helping the needy right before a major election may be questionable, one cannot deny the fact that the Refah Party did make significant efforts to both identify and assist the poor and disadvantaged.

The fact that Refah officials recognized a number of social problems and made concerted efforts in response to these social ills says much about the Refah Party’s approach to representative governing. As a Turkish journalist, Dogu Ergil, puts it, “Refah is the vehicle that is carrying the marginal, downtrodden, and neglected to the center of power. It will never lose its grip because these people were not represented before. No [other] political party represents the people at the political level or the popular level and there are no [other] grass-roots organizations to influence the state.” Again, Refah’s ability to respond to public opinion that translated into effective public policy has increased the people’s expectations of how government officials should act in office.

APPROACH TO GOVERNING

Refah Party officials’ performance in office demonstrates the party’s commitment to representative governing. Many Refah mayors have instituted important administrative mechanisms such as “peoples’ councils,” where mayors and other government officials meet with constituents once a week to hear their grievances. Government officials inviting criticism is a revolutionary phenomenon in Turkey. This is particularly impressive when contrasted with the results of a recent
political poll that found that 57 percent of the 2,722 Turkish respondents did not think they could criticize the government. By their success in advancing interest articulation and interest aggregation, Refah mayors have raised the bar for what constitutes a "successful record" for a mayor. Subsequently, the future mayors of Turkey, regardless of their party affiliation, will be held to a higher standard.

Commentators agree that politicians who can effectively address and deal with the metropolitan phenomena of garbage, potholes, and mud will win reelection. The major political parties have tended to avoid these subjects. However, Refah Party politicians not only made campaign promises to deal with the filth, but they also followed through by cleaning up a number of Turkish cities. In January 1997, an observer reported that in municipalities controlled by the Refah Party "busses run, the garbage is collected, and social services in general have improved." In addition, a journalist from the Christian Science Monitor commented on the changes that have occurred in the Refah-run municipality of Sincan since the Refah government took office: "Three years ago this town was known as 'Mud Sincan,' because of neglect from previous secular local governments, which residents say were corrupt, but Sincan today is well-paved, boasting green areas and a huge children's park, and most people have water." In Istanbul, reporters have noticed that "rubbish is collected regularly. Trees have been planted and better coal has been introduced to replace the foul lignite responsible for the Istanbul winter smog." The Refah Party's commitment to action is unprecedented in Turkish politics. These small acts, directed toward the betterment of living conditions in Turkey, have accomplished a greater good for society in that "people's expectations of what the state ought to deliver are increasing." This change is owed to Refah's representative policies.

However, the Refah Party's comparatively superior service record did not come without accompanying costs to society. In fact, taxpayers are now picking up the bill for many of the Refah Party's municipal improvement projects, through substantial price inflation on basic staples such as bread and gasoline. Furthermore, the Refah Party's use of government funding for popular subsidies has left the Social Security Administration heavily indebted to foreign creditors.

Additionally, despite the Refah Party's implementation of many successful policies, they have failed to come through on a number of important campaign promises. The longer Refah officials were in office, the more apparent it became to Turkish citizens that the Refah Party's rhetoric was based more on symbolism than on substance. Furthermore, the Refah Party's attempt to appease the powers-that-be caused the movement to abandon many of its basic principles.

For example, although the party was somewhat successful in eliminating old-fashioned bribery, it has since been replaced with "voluntary contributions" to party organizations and the directing of municipal contracts to party faithful. Refah Party officials demonstrated that they are not above such abuses of power. However, when the positive and negative of the Refah Party's approach to governing are aggregated, one must conclude that the Refah Party played an important role in changing Turkey's political system for the better. This is especially evident when the Refah Party's approach to governing is compared with that of other Turkish political parties.

DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Turkish political analyst Dr. Debbie Lovatt noted, "Since the Islamist Welfare Party led by Necmettin Erbakan came to power in July 1996 following the 1995 elections, a young but dynamic civil society has been particularly apparent." The rise of newly formed civil organizations, independent of traditional political parties, is strong evidence of the influential role the Refah Party played in increasing the expectations Turkish citizens have for their government officials. Indeed, by creating an environment where government officials were accessible and responsive to public demand, the Refah Party has encouraged the creation of civil society groups. In particular, the resurgence of

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labor parties in Turkey is a notable advancement. The labor strike of March 6, 1999, is an important example of the power civil society groups have gained. Work halted as 5,000 workers demonstrated in the streets of Ankara. They demanded the right to negotiate pay by means of collective bargaining. Although the government later consented to a 20 percent pay raise, it was later obliged to promise an additional 10 percent raise in October. The results of this strike (namely that the people spoke and the government responded) are remarkable, especially when contrasted with the attitudes of government official prior to the Refah Party's ascendance to power. The resultant pay raises obtained through the strike of March 6 clearly demonstrate the changes that have occurred and are continuing to occur as a direct result of the Refah Party's approach to representative governing.

THE FUTURE OF POLITICAL ISLAM IN TURKEY

Although the Refah Party was pushed out of office, and its daughter organization, the Virtue Party, suffered major losses in the election of 1999 (ironically due to Virtue Party officials inability to rise to the level of popular expectation left by the Refah Party), the Islamic movement has renewed hopes. The Islamic theme of championing the periphery against the center and the particularism of Islamic culture has become a source of identity for youth of Turkey. In fact, a recent survey found that 45 percent of those who voted for the Islamic party were between the ages of fourteen and thirty-four. By contrast, most of those who voted for the social democratic parties were over the age of thirty-five. The Turkish Generation X seems to be oriented toward the Islamic movement. Additionally, if the economy continues to falter, it may provide an opening for the Islamic opposition to revive its fortunes.

The success of the Refah Party has permanently changed the political system in Turkey. Even if the Islamists are unable to regain the political prominence they once enjoyed, their mark upon Turkish politics will remain. The Refah phenomenon has created a political climate in Turkey where political parties are expected to more fully represent the interests of their constituencies and also provide a greater number of much-needed services. By responding to the demands of the people of Turkey, Refah has engendered in their constituencies an understanding of the power the people may possess if they are well organized and effectively voice their concerns. This understanding has translated into a political society where interest articulation and interest aggregation are far more prevalent than ever before. The consequences of the Refah Party's success in organizing a grassroots political movement will continue to be felt in future elections.

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7 Toprak, “Civil Society in Turkey,” 106.
15 Idem.
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